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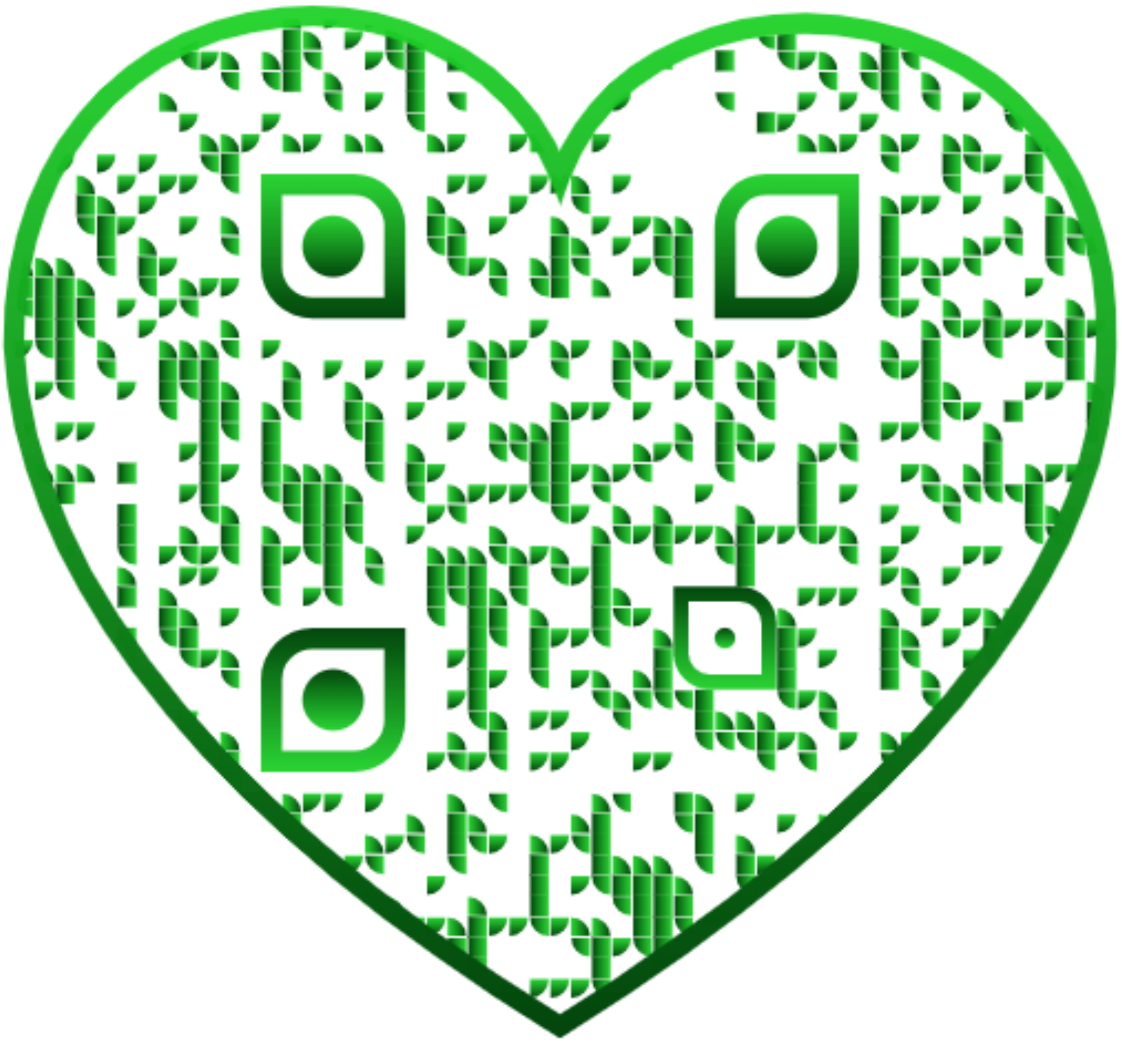

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G-400 PRO

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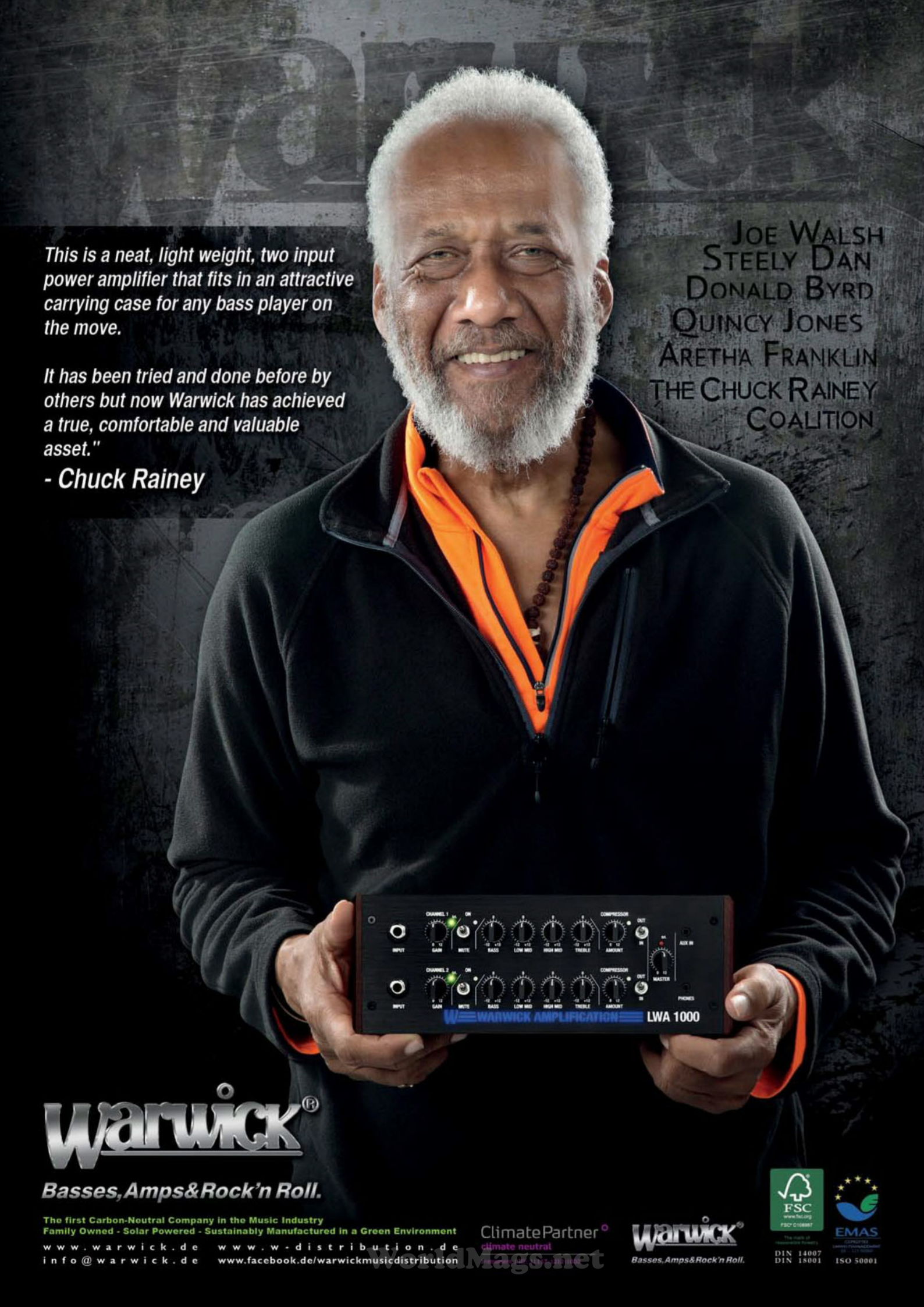
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Creating history today...

There are many reasons why Brian May has more than earned the title of guitar hero over the years, and while his playing has often been rightly analysed and praised, we're here this issue to celebrate what the young Brian and his father achieved by building that famous guitar long before Queen became successful. This month's cover feature, where we follow in Brian's footsteps – and find out what could be built with under £200 for a budget in the 21st century – will hopefully inspire you to do something similar. Even if you don't have any desire to get building, learning about the potential challenges and options is a right riveting read.

If you prefer your instruments and equipment ready-made then head on over to the reviews sections for a veritable cornucopia of gear from the likes of G&L, Blackstar, Duesenberg and more. On the vintage front, Phil Harris gets all nostalgic about his struggles on learning to play back in the day, and there's a huge historical bonanza on Gibson amps to be savoured.

Among our other features is a tribute to the late, great Jack Bruce. The world truly lost a music legend when he passed away, and we can only hope our acknowledgement does the man justice.

We wish you success in all your guitar-related endeavours and we hope you enjoy both the magazine – and any subsequent trips you make to our website, www.guitar-bass.net...

John

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In this issue

January 2015 Vol 26 No 04

Features

Tribute to Jack Bruce 28
We look back at the life and influence of the man who redefined the role of rock bassman both in his time with Cream and solo

Michael Stern & Eric Johnson 34
Two polar opposite guitar visionaries collide to create some unique fretboard magic

Joe Perry 40
Aerosmith's lead man reflects on a life of rock'n'roll excess and guitars loved and lost

Vintage

Hooked On Classics 85
Phil Harris takes a wistful look back at the guitars that first reeled him in as a teenager

The History Of Gibson Amps 88
Gibson amps were amongst the first to emerge in the 1930s, and certain models are still coveted, but by 1980 they had disappeared from the catalogue. We look back and ask why

Regulars

READERS LETTERS 9 NEWS 10 ALBUM REVIEWS 12

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Cover photo: Mike Prior

Gear

G&L Tribute Series ASAT Classic & Bluesboy Semi-Hollow 48
A pair of mid-price twangers that adapt the original concept with polished results

BC Rich Polarity Deluxe 54
Versatile hybrid electric offering humbucker, single-coil and piezo tones in a pointy package

Blackstar Fly Mini Amp 58
A tiny 3W portable amp/hi-fi packed with much tonal tweakage possibility, all for just £50

Howling Wolf 5-15 Combo 60
Devised with precise frequency shaping in mind, this UK amp takes a fresh approach

DOD Envelope Filter 440 & Bifet Boost 410 64
Classic '70s auto-wah and boost stompboxes re-imagined for the 21st century

Eko Mini EVO EQ & EGO Icon Acoustics 66
An elegant sunburst OM and a cute travel dread from Italy's best-known guitar name

Duesenberg Motown Bass 74
A very cool-looking long scale, semi-hollow bass designed with hit-factory tones in mind

Tanglewood Evolution IV TAB1 CE Electro-Acoustic Bass 78
A great value jumbo low-ender with a full 34" scale, maple binding and Fishman electrics

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PAGE 112

Workshop

Drills For thrills 98
Get that picking hand up to speed with this testing jazz-chord fuelled workout

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ADAM DUTKIEWICZ
KILLSWITCH ENGAGE
PLAYS #LANEYAMPS
Laney
EST. 1967
JUST PLAY IT
JOEL STROETZEL
KILLSWITCH ENGAGE
PLAYS #LANEYAMPS
HAVE
YOU HEARD
US LATELY?
KIKO LOUREIRO
ANGRA
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Reverberations

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THE BISHOP OF DENMARK STREET

THE GUITARIST'S LIFE CYCLE PT 2

This month **Sid Bishop** muses on how things can improve when guitar players gain a mature view of what they do...

THE BISHOP OF DENMARK STREET

THE GUITARIST'S LIFE CYCLE

Try as you might, you cannot escape the Six Ages Of Twang... or is it seven? **Sid Bishop** looks at how we tend to approach music differently through the decades, and rest assured, things don't necessarily get worse...

I would take the view that only a small proportion of beginners ever forecast a lifelong career in the music industry. It was all just a bit of a lark

Sid Bishop's articles strike a chord

STAR LETTER

THE CYCLE OF LIFE

I would like to personally thank Sid Bishop for his two excellent articles on *The Guitarist's Life Cycle* in recent issues. I knew Sid from his Denmark Street days and he is a true gentleman! We are about the same age and he has managed to put into words exactly what most of us older guys have experienced over the years.

The most positive message I have taken from what Sid has written is that you are never too old to play and that the guitar is a lifelong friend and companion which will give you untold pleasure whether you just play for fun at home or still do the occasional gig, if and when you can get one. I have found that playing the guitar is also a great way to communicate with players of all ages as we have a common interest and like Sid, I have had many young guys asking me how I get my sound. I love to pass on any knowledge gained over the years. Our generation was so lucky in that we were able to witness first hand and watch live all the greats – Hendrix, Clapton, Beck, Green, Page – even when they were playing small venues where we could stand just a few feet away and see and hear how they played. Those were the best guitar lessons anyone could have!

The only part where Sid and I differ is that I have taken up lap steel so that I can occasionally sit down to play! It's a far easier proposition for an old blues rocker like me than learning all those impossible jazz chords!

Darryl West *via email*

G&B **Thanks for your kind words, Darryl. Sid's very happy that his columns are being read and appreciated. As an aside, based on your comments on lap steel, we'd like to know what other string-driven instruments readers have played, as well as guitar. We're all for such escapades, and we'd be interested to know your reasons behind it. Please let us know when you get a chance...**

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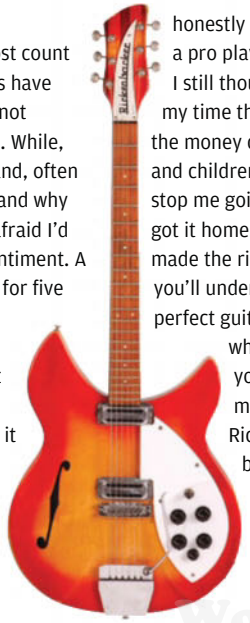
YOU'RE WORTH IT...

Having been a reader for years, I've lost count of the amount of times famous players have said something along the lines of 'It's not about the guitar, it's about the player'. While, being very much an amateur player (and, often times, relegated to my sofa) I understand why you'd take their word over mine, I'm afraid I'd have to disagree strongly with that sentiment. A couple of months ago, after saving up for five years (with a mortgage and three teenage children to support, money isn't plentiful) I finally managed to get my dream guitar, a Rickenbacker 330. I won't bore you with the reasons why it is my ideal instrument, but I went through years of agonising over whether I should get one or not. After all, I had a couple of perfectly good guitars already, and I couldn't honestly say that I needed it, given that I'm not a pro player. Even when I had saved the money, I still thought I was being an idiot, and spent my time thinking of all the more sensible things the money could go on. In the end, it was my wife and children who forced me into it – probably to stop me going on about it. But from the moment I got it home, and hit the first chord I knew I'd made the right decision. As fellow guitar players, you'll understand what it's like to have your perfect guitar. If you don't, I'd urge you to do whatever you can (within reason) to get your ideal instrument. Every spare moment I have now, I'm rushing to the Rickenbacker to play it some more. I've been inspired to learn again, and even the hoary old stuff I already know seems a lot better than before. I'm happily going to sell the other two guitars I have. In short, I think it's about the player AND the guitar. I understand it might not be the easiest thing in the world to achieve, but – again – I urge every guitar player to try and find your ideal six-string mate. It's worth waiting for.


New guitar, new lease on life?

Ralph Mannion *via email*

G&B **We're delighted to hear you've found 'the one', sir. While we agree that many things are about the player rather than the instrument, the joys of having the right guitar in your hands is a magical feeling. Enjoy every minute.**

THE MAIN LAINE

Is it possible to run a feature on the great Denny Laine? Isn't his work with the Moody Blues and Wings enough to get him in the mag. He's a criminally overrated player. Do what you can.

Stuart Vine *via email*

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Woke up this mornin'... NEWS

Charlie Watkins 1923-2014

We salute the man who launched more innovations on early British rock'n'roll than any other native manufacturer

Inventor, engineer and British music instrument industry manufacturer Charlie Watkins has died at the age of 91. Guitarists will remember him for giving us some of the first successful, and best-loved, UK-made electric guitars and amps as well as the legendary Copicat echo unit, yet perhaps his greatest legacy is in his pioneering work in PA technology.

Watkins began by selling records and accordions in his shop in Balham, London. When skiffle came along in 1955, he sold acoustic guitars; then, as rock'n'roll took hold and the dearth of guitar amplifiers became clear, he saw an opportunity to build and sell his own. The first was the 10W Westminster, which was soon joined by the 5W Clubman and the revered 15W Dominator.

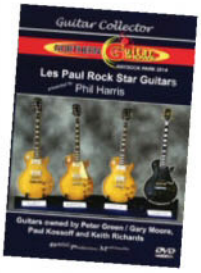
When American artists like Duane Eddy hit big, British guitarists craved an echo device. Again Charlie stepped in and created the unit that to this day is regarded as one of the classics, the tape-loop driven Copicat. The next natural step was a Watkins electric guitar and the Rapier arrived in 1959, pipped to the post as the first Brit-built solidbody electric by just a few months (the Dallas Tuxedo took that honour). By 1961, strong sales meant Watkins were established as one of the big three of the UK music instrument trade.

In 1964 Watkins switched to the WEM banner – Watkins Electric Music – and the first PA system was introduced, boasting 30W. When the Byrds toured in 1965 using WEM's system, Charlie realised extra volume was needed. Again he proved his ingenuity, recognising that you could link high-power hi-fi amps driven by a common preamp, and the result was the SL100 Slave Amplifier. WEM was invited to provide the PA system for the 1967 Windsor Jazz Festival featuring acts like acts like Cream, Fleetwood Mac and the Small Faces. Using several SL100s Watkins provided an unprecedented 1000W, and the crowd were ecstatic – although the mayor, the police and the Noise Abatement Society all tried to pull the plug. WEM systems provided the sound for many of the major rock festivals of the next decade, most famously at the Isle Of Wight Festival and at the Stones' concert in Hyde Park in 1969. Without Charlie Watkins' brilliant work, the music of the '60s and '70s would have sounded very different indeed.

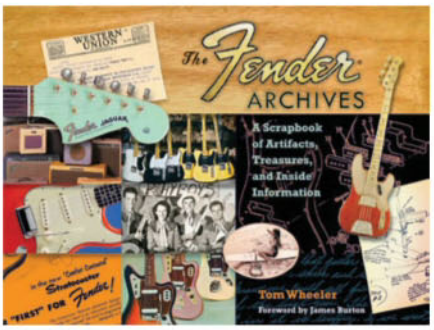
PRS 30th Anniversary

It was 1985 when the first factory PRS guitar left the workbench, and the company will be turning 30 years old in 2015. To celebrate this triple-decade landmark PRS will be offering a series of 30th Anniversary Custom 24 guitars in each of its lines: US-made Private Stock (with 60 guitars available), the US-made Core line (with an Artist option too), the vintage-inspired US-made S2, and a Korean-built SE. All the commemorative guitars will echo the original PRS model, freshly updated with a special-pattern birds fingerboard inlay and a celebratory trussrod cover. See www.prsguitars.com for more info.

A FEAST OF '59s ON DVD



This DVD presents three of the most famous '59 Les Pauls on the planet being put through their paces at the 2014 Haydock Northern Guitar Show by vintage guru Phil Harris. In front of a live audience Phil presents the 'Greeny' Peter Green and the Keith Richards and Paul Kossoff LPS, explains the history, and then reveals himself tasty player in his own right. A rare opportunity to judge for yourself why these particular instruments are so special. To grab a copy go to www.inspirationandcraft.co.uk.



The Fender Archives

***The Fender Archives* brings you closer to the early days of Fender than ever before. Author Tom Wheeler has dug through dusty old files in Fender's offices, metal cabinets in a Corona warehouse, the family archives of Fender marketing boss Don Randall and many private collections to unearth rare artefacts, treasures and inside information. Handwritten letters, personal logbooks, in-house memos and Leo Fender's drawing-board sketches are all on show, shedding new light on the company's creations. Folders within the book contain reproduced documents, sales material and photos, adding an extra dimension to the experience. See www.halleonardbooks.com.**

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GIBSON GLAMOUR

Gibson are gearing up for January's NAMM show with a host of new guitars beyond the expected payload of LPs. Until now Firebirds have usually come with P90s or mini-humbuckers so the Firebird 7 can claim to be a brand new model due to a triple helping of full-size 57 Classic Humbuckers. The original neck-through, nine-ply, mahogany-winged construction is present and correct, and the guitar will be priced just under £2000.If three humbuckers float your boat, then for much the same outlay the handsome SGS3 2015 is well worth a spin; it also packs three 57 Classics along with sleek 'Black Beauty' style appointments and a vintage-style Sideways Vibrola updated for improved performance. Traditionalists might favour the new recreation of the 1959 ES-225 from Gibson Memphis; this looks like it'll be a close reissue of the great hollowbody thinline with two P90s and the original-style wrapover bridge/tailpiece. The price should come in around £2500.

Be A Guitar Teacher

***Be A Guitar Teacher* is a new four and half hour home-study video course designed to help guitarists become guitar tutors. The course takes on every element involved including preparation of material, self-promotion, repertoire and music theory. It also offers case studies and example guitar lessons, with practical demonstrations throughout.**

The course's creator, Stuart Bahn, is looking to create a gold standard of guitar tuition with this course and he believes there are many excellent potential teachers out there. 'You don't need to be a world-class player or academically gifted to teach,' he asserts. 'You just need to be better than your students and willing to develop your teaching skills.' Tutors in the UK typically charge £25-£50 per hour – depending on location – and the course can be download from www.BeAGuitarTeacher.com for around £85.

GRETSCH'S FALCON GETS THE BLUES

The new Gretsch Crème de Marine Falcon is a rare bird indeed. This limited edition 'White' Falcon G6136T hollowbody is dressed in a fetching soft blue finish which sets off the famed gold hardware and appointments a treat. The elegant shape is enhanced further by 1959-style trestle bracing, gold-sparkle binding, a three-piece maple neck with ebony fingerboard, dual High Sensitive Filter'Tron pickups with pickup selector and three-position master tone switch, Space Control bridge and a Bigsby B6GB vibrato. The Grover Imperial tuners are, of course, goldplated. The retail price should be around the £3000 mark, which Includes a deluxe hardshell case. Go to www.gretschguitars.com for more.

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WHERE? **7 intimate shows from Kendal to Hereford**
TICKETS **From £7**
CONTACT **www.mickralphsbluesband.co.uk**

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6-9 FEBRUARY
Magnum, Slade, Black Star Riders, Family, Mick Ralphs and Bernie Marsden in a four-day rock feast
WHERE? **Butlins Minehead, Somerset**
TICKETS **Three nights from £99 per person**
CONTACT **www.bigweekends.com/0845 070 4734**

J Mascis
1-19 JANUARY
Dinosaur Jr's fuzzed-up riffmeister goes unplugged to showcase his mighty fine mellow solo catalogue
WHERE? **10 gigs across the land**
TICKETS **From £15**
CONTACT **www.jmascis.com**

Great British Rock & Blues Festival
23-26 JANUARY
Nazareth, Caravan, Dr Feelgood, Robbie MacIntosh, Martin Barre and more grace this Butlins weekender
WHERE? **Butlins Skegness, Lincolnshire**
TICKETS **Three nights from £99 per person**
CONTACT **www.bigweekends.com/0870 162 1805**

Tommy Emmanuel
13-23 JANUARY
The Aussie acoustic fingerstyle virtuoso returns to wow the UK with his astonishing skills
WHERE? **8 shows across the country**
TICKETS **From £20**
CONTACT **www.tommyemmanuel.com**

Queen
13-24 JANUARY
Well, it's actually Roger Taylor and Brian May with some ringers, but Brian's stinging leads still shine
WHERE? **8 area shows from London to Glasgow**
TICKETS **From £66.55**
CONTACT **www.queenonline.com/ticketmaster**

Album reviews

Various
AN AMERICANA CHRISTMAS
New West

Presents? Check! Full roast dinner and all the trimmings? Check! Americana Christmas compilation? And che-eck! If you haven't given it some proper consideration, from the plaintive plucking that powers up Luther Dickinson's

version of *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* to the swinging twang of Dwight Yoakam's *Run Run Rudolph,* this is a great mix of breezy Yuletide bonhomie and melancholy for all.

St Nicks Got The Blues
ST NICKS GOT THE BLUES
Mighty Village

In an audacious move, hoary material such as *Silent Night, God Rest You Merry Gentlemen* and *Jingle Bells* is delivered via the medium of the guitar instrumental, from bare-bones bottleneck to deft gypsy jazz and Chuck Berry-style

double-stops. These Christmas carols sound heavenly again, but our juke-joint Santa is secretive. Who could be behind this festive musical spread? We have our suspicions.

Neil Young
STORYTONE
Warner Bros

That trademark wavery Young vocal is backed here, live in the studio, with a 92-piece orchestra. Neil does like to stretch himself and the songs are strong but if the combination sits uneasily, the deluxe album has a bonus CD with sparse acoustic

takes of every track – a fine piece of work in its own right. The electrics come out for *I Wanna Drive My Car* and *Like You Used To Do* on both versions, so mustn't grumble.

Gong
I SEE YOU
Madfish

At the time of writing Gong's Daevid Allen is undergoing medical treatment, but *I See You* certainly doesn't suffer from any maladies. New guitar player Kavus Torabi, formerly of the Cardiacs, certainly doesn't let the side down, providing

propulsive rhythm parts and deft melodic ideas that add much to the listener's enjoyment. The psych stalwarts' past shouldn't be ignored, but it's good to know Gong are still vital.

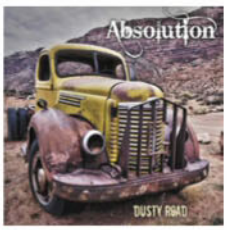
Wild Eyes
ABOVE BECOMES BELOW
Heavy Psych Sounds

The relentless riffage of San Francisco's Wild Eyes takes wah-driven psychedelic rock to levels unbreached since the hallowed days of the '70s. Janiece Gonzalez's ferocious soul-infused vocals sweeten the bombast of guitarman Chris Corona's

devastating pentatonics with sublime swagger; think Blue Cheer meets the Stooges fronted by Janis Joplin on steroids. It's a mere 26 minutes, but debut LP *Get Into It!* will sate you further.

Absolution
DUSTY ROAD
Blues Boulevard

Those who like their blues-rock guitar to be dry and downright dirty will be high in hog heaven with the latest offering from UK trio Absolution. Yes, we're certain that guitar slinger'n'singer Joe Fawcett is a Billy Gibbons fan, but he possesses enough



invention and songwriting chops to let his influences raise him up, rather than lead him by the nose. *Dusty Road* is a rifftastic mother of a record that guarantees rockin' joy.

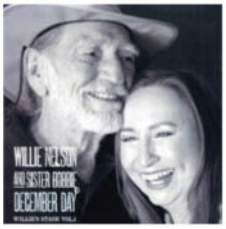
AC/DC
ROCK OR BUST
Columbia

When Malcolm Young revealed he could no longer play due to illness, the world feared AC/DC's number might be up. Thankfully, there's gas in the tank yet. Nephew Stevie Young steps in on rhythm, and his genes are undeniable. The title

track is a stormer cast in the finest AD/DC tradition, while *Rock The House* and *Baptism By Fire* are riff-driven monsters of the highest order. A majestic return.

Willie Nelson & Sister Bobbie
DECEMBER DAY: WILLIE'S STASH VOL.1
Sony/Legacy

Big sister Bobbie Nelson is a long-term member of Willie's Family Band touring outfit, and the siblings often sit and play through favourite tunes on the tourbus, a habit from which this intimate, eclectic mix springs. There are 11 new takes on



Willie's songs plus covers ranging from Django's *Nuages* to Irving Berlin's *What'll I Do*, and the infectious warmth almost makes you feel like part of the family.

Kill It Kid
YOU OWE NOTHING
Sire/Warner Bros

Kill It Kid's Chris Turpin was once an acoustic-wielding denizen of open mic nights. These days, armed with his electric set to stun, he delivers an often thrilling mix of blues meets grunge. Showing no desire to hide any part of the sweet

and sour natures of either genre, Kill It Kid's new album features evocative sustain-fuelled refrains and powerhouse licks for all to savour.

SNAP JUDGEMENTS

Prosperina
HARNESS – MINUS
Maybe

The South Wales rock combo's second album proves to any doubters that they are getting better and better at delivering both the heavy and the melody

Richard Durrant & Howard Beach
GUITAR & HARPSICHORD
LongMan

Maverick six-stringer Durrant turns his hand to Vivaldi and Bach with Beach adding a baroque flavour via harpsichord. Bizarre yet mesmerising

Jim Stapely
LONG TIME COMING
Mita

Tony Visconti-produced young singer with a gutsy voice and a clear love of Free, Joe Cocker and the like. Monster hooks and polished tunes in abundance

Alvin Stardust
ALVIN
Conehead

The recent death of the Brit veteran makes this, his first studio LP since 1984, a bittersweet joy, but it's a winning mix of roots and rock which does his memory proud

Mojo Makers
DEVILS HANDS
Hypertension

This young Danish combo have developed a charismatic strain of blues and '70s soul that at its best is a haunting delight. Definitely ones to watch – and hear

Guinga
ROENDOPINHO
Acoustic Music

Brazilian nylon-stringer and once a practising dentist, now revered as one of the country's top players and songwriters. Class and virtuosity to marvel at

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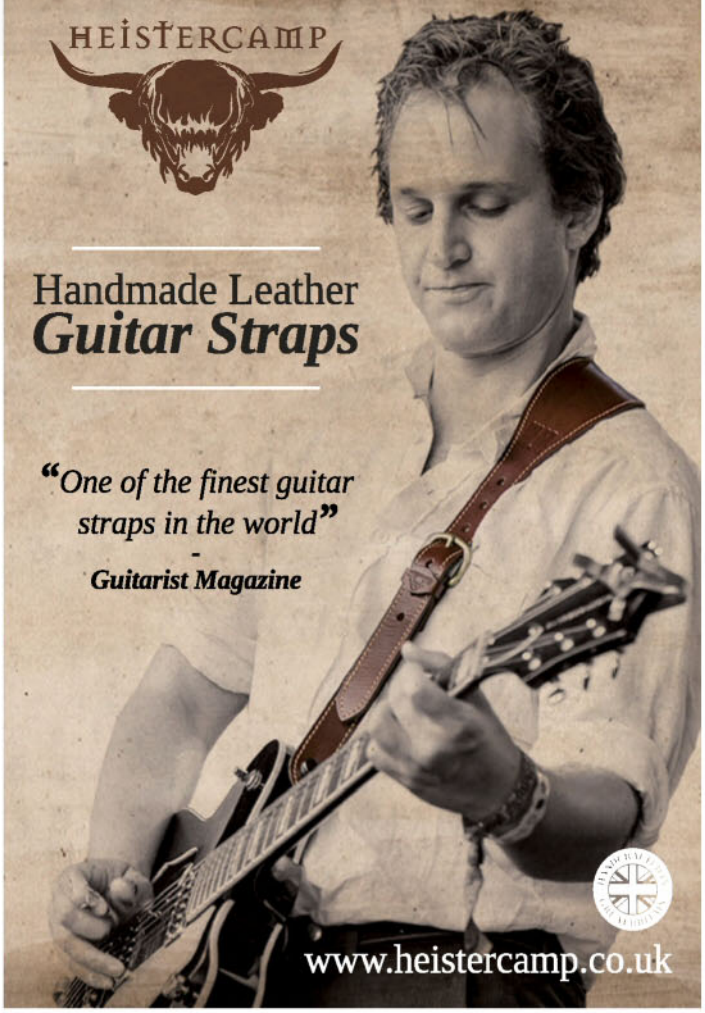

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Main photo: Mike Prior Insert: Brian May by Chris Walter/WireImage/Getty images

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CODE Red

Can you travel the same guitar-building road as Brian May with a budget of under £200? **Dave Walsh** accepts the challenge, and shows us how it's done...

Brian May and his father Harold built the iconic Red Special 50 years ago using whatever they could lay their hands on for an estimated total of 10 guineas. To celebrate this anniversary, we thought it would interesting to build our own version of the guitar – not an exact copy, but an instrument that you can modify to your own tastes using these techniques in the spirit of one of the most celebrated handmade guitars ever built. We also decided to build it in under a month from start to finish...

Clearly, building an exact replica just wasn't practical due to the complex nature of the build and also the expense of such an undertaking. So we decided to approach it from a different angle: what could be built for a miniscule budget that retained the most important elements but was simple enough to attempt at home?

Most of the tools available to a modern guitar-building workshop, we decided, would be banned: no pin routing, CNC or complex finishing techniques or materials would be used – just a few power tools and a selection of hand tools. A bandsaw was used briefly, but most of the cuts could be performed with a common or garden DIY jigsaw or, if patience allowed, a hand saw and coping saw. We did include a handheld router, but it's just a basic model that many people will have easy access to. ↔

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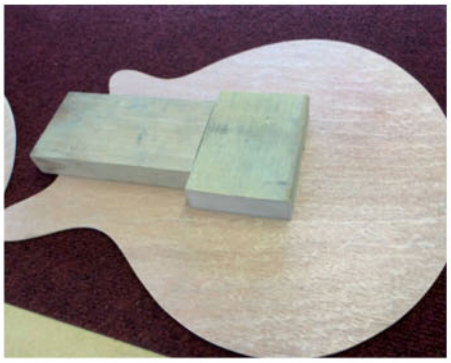
All photos (unless otherwise stated) copyright Dave Walsh

The basis for our build is a handmade tribute dating from the mid-1990s

Using the existing guitar as a template, we begin by marking the outline on plywood sheet

Cutting the outline with a jigsaw

Perfect mirror images of front and back



Neck will be set into these maple centre blocks

Construction Choices

The original Red Special is a semi-solid electric guitar using a chunky one-piece mahogany neck bolted into a lightweight body formed from a solid oak centre section and hollowed wings made from blockboard, with the joins disguised by veneers. The unusual 24" scale length, neck woods and tone chambers will be vital to creating a similar acoustic voice, so we're staying close – with a few budgetary modifications. A mahogany neck is essential to capture the warmth of tone associated with the RS, but the complex body would need to be slightly different. Blockboard was a commonly available sheet material back in the day; we'll be using MDF for the wing sections of the body because it's cheap, readily available and in many ways is the blockboard of today. It doesn't have great tensile strength but it doesn't matter as the MDF doesn't take any of the string tension.

Some other tough decisions were made early on, such as the choice not to fabricate or incorporate a vibrato of any sort. The original RS uses an ingenious handmade unit that rocks on a knife-edge buried beneath the guitar top and a roller bridge that was years ahead of its time. Yes, we could use a budget Strat fulcrum vibrato, but it looks totally wrong and will probably sound wrong too. A cheap vibrato is also a pain to keep in tune, so a hardtail bridge will be used. I toyed with the idea of a Tele bridge or even a one-piece wrapover unit but ultimately a good old tune-o-matic and stop tailpiece won the day. A perfectly usable pair can be bought for £20 and offer solid string anchoring and tone.

The body outline we used is close to the original, if not exact. I made a replica in the mid-'90s before any plans or templates were available online; reliable information was very scarce so I researched it as much as possible, and guessed the rest. Digging out my replica, I decided that the outline was close enough to use as a basis for the body.

The mahogany neck would use an elongated heel join set deep into the body. A pre-squared quarter-sawn mahogany neck blank, bought online, was good quality and excellent value. The dimensions – 750mm long, 70mm wide, 25mm deep – were almost

BRIAN'S GUITAR

The Red Special is nothing short of a work of genius. Built by Brian and his dad Harold in 1963-'64, the guitar is now 50 years old and is being celebrated in a new book published by Carlton Books, *Brian May's Red Special: The Story Of The Homemade Guitar That Rocked Queen And The World*. It's a fascinating insight into how the guitar was made, featuring never-before-seen images of the dismantled instrument and X-ray shots of the famous acoustic chambers. A must-have for fans of the Red Special.

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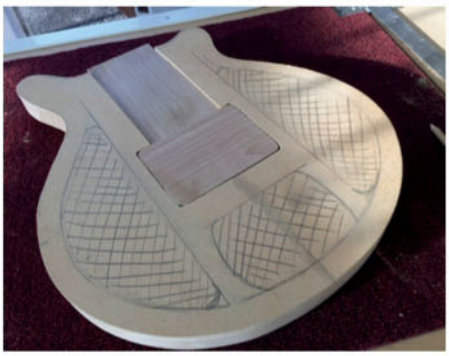
Beginning to glue together the layers of 12mm and 18mm MDF to make the middle sandwich



Fitting maple sections and marking out cavities

Sawing cavities, and the completed centre slab

spot-on for our neck. It would leave enough length for the pointed headstock and heel to be carved from one piece. I also sourced an oak fingerboard blank that was already slotted for 24 frets with the correct 24" scale length. We could have made one but I felt that it may be too tricky to try at home without some specialist tools, and I also selected a dual action truss rod for ease of fitting.

Beginning The Body

Real guitar making usually begins with carefully making an extensive set of templates. We didn't have time for that as it's too long-winded and not really necessary to achieve a decent one-off result. After a quick nose around, a couple of small sheets of 4mm thick plywood were discovered that had once been a protective layer on a shipment of goods. A quick inspection showed that they had a pleasant reddish quality on the top layer and were thick and strong enough to act as a top and back for a semi-solid guitar. Laying my own replica on top of the sheets I traced the outline and cut the shape – one for the top and one for the back – then temporarily joined the two pieces using small pieces of double-sided tape which allow the edges to be sanded flush, leaving some extra material at the neck join area for tweaking later. Once separated again, we end up with two perfectly matched mirror image pieces that could now be used not only as a template for the centre of the body sandwich but would eventually form the actual top and back. This is the time to measure and draw the centre lines as they'll be used later for lining up the rest of the body.

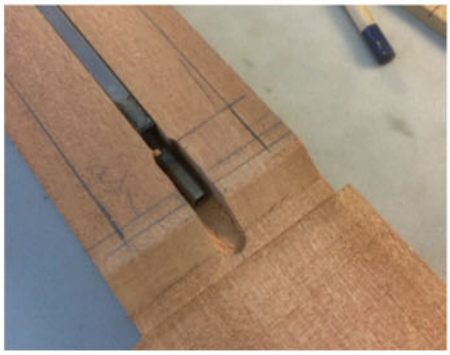
We chose 4mm ply for the front and back and two MDF offcuts which when glued together would form a 38mm slab, thick enough for the body

Moving to the pictures at the top of this page, you'll see some other MDF offcuts that fell into our hands – a 12mm and an 18mm piece that when glued together with the plywood back and sides would form a slab. Adding in the additional 8mm thickness from the plywood gave us a total thickness of 38mm – thick enough for the body. Once dry these were also cut and trimmed to rough shape. Tip: have a nose around the timber cutting section of your local DIY store as they usually have a bin of off-cuts going cheap, and they'll be big enough for a guitar body. (Note: I did cheat and use a small bandsaw for some of this work, but a jigsaw works just as well. Don't forget to wear a mask when working with MDF as it's a carcinogenic.)

The original RS body incorporates a piece of rock-hard oak table as the central spine that the neck and wings attach too. I didn't have any oak but I did have an offcut from a maple neck blank. I decided to cut a section off and glue it together to form a narrower section to accept the eventual neck pocket; the wider end piece would give a solid section to anchor the bridge and tailpiece. ➔

Our blank is nice and square. First, the trussrod...

Routing out the trussrod channel



The Allen key channel needs a 9.5mm router bit

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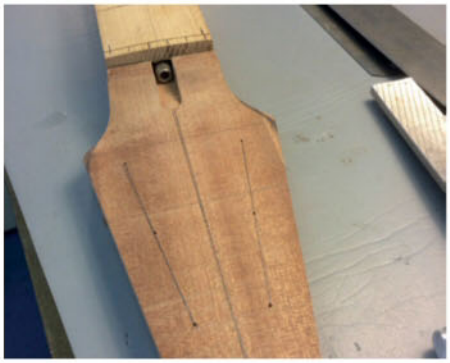
Gluing the fingerboard with locating pins

Note that we'll be using a zero fret



Shaping the headstock and marking tuner holes

Rough-shaping the inch-deep neck with a rasp

Neck pocket is routed for correct neck angle

Now the neck tenon can be sanded flush

Using the centre lines that we drew earlier meant that lining up the correct position for the inserts was easy. Use the fingerboard blank and a long steel ruler to roughly mark where the bridge will go (24" from the centre of the zero fret in this instance) and position the maple blocks, then draw accurately around them. Now you just need to remove the unwanted MDF and glue in the inserts. Start by marking and drilling the corners out and then using the jigsaw trim out the excess. Cut just inside the line for safety and file and sand up to the line for a snug fit. Glue it all together using Titebond on a flat board for support and to keep it level.

Once dry we mark out and cut out the acoustic chambers. We're going for an approximation which has two large sections removed down each side of the central spine and a smaller one behind the bridge where the vibrato lives on the original. Again we mark and drill the corners and then use a jigsaw to remove the waste. It looks a little crude at this stage but some elbow grease with files and sandpaper soon clean up the cuts – a bobbin sander would have been useful, but I the chambers aren't visible once the top and back are glued on.

Once we're happy that it's clean, smooth and level, we go ahead and attach the back piece of plywood. Spool clamps are useful but at a push a level surface and a few heavy books or even bricks will do the job. I used contact adhesive here as it allows for an instant and very sturdy bond.

Starting The Neck

While the body dries we can begin building the neck. We used the simplest method, which is a mix of Fender style necks, with the elongated heel mentioned earlier. The original uses a huge chunk of mahogany harvested from a fireplace with a separate oak fingerboard and a neatly carved angled headstock, but we're going to ditch the angled headstock and use the simpler Fender method of a flat un-angled headstock, all cut from the same blank.

Our 25mm deep blank is long enough to incorporate the heel and headstock in one go, but it was very slightly too narrow at the headstock for the full width of the triangular section. Once the neck width was drawn out to 55mm at the heel it left 15mm spare which I carefully trimmed off and attached to the headstock area as small wings taken from the heel end to widen it enough to create the distinctive pointed shape.

Our neck blank was already accurately cut and square on all sides; this was the main reason for buying in a pre-shaped blank, and it's a must if you're going to rout for a truss rod channel as you wouldn't necessarily have access to the machines needed to true it up. A decent plane, some patience, a steel straight edge and a square will do the trick, unless you

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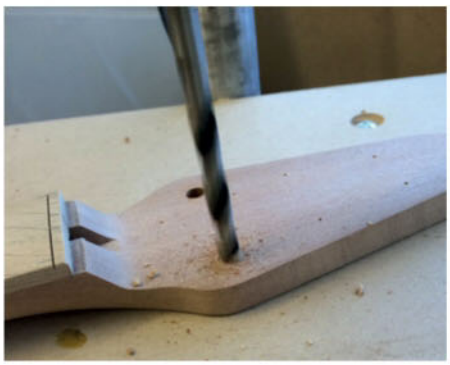
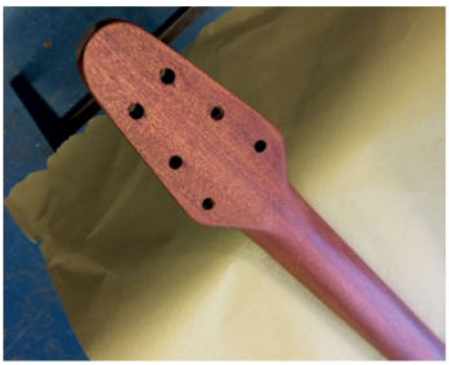


Drilling the tuner holes to 10mm



Colouring the neck with mahogany stain

The fingerboard will be sprayed or dyed black

decide to use a real fireplace...

Again using the simplest method available, we chose a dual-action rod that sits in a flat channel 6mm wide by 10mm deep. Clamping the blank to the bench and fitting the guide to the router, we positioned the rod in the correct spot, exactly centre and leaving enough length either end for the heel and headstock. Set the router guide for the centre of the blank and rout the slot; spending a few extra minutes to line everything up accurately will allow you to not only rout it out in two or three passes but also use the clamps that hold the blank level to the bench as 'stops' for the router, ensuring a perfectly-cut truss rod slot. With the guide still attached we swap to a 9.5mm router bit and enlarge the opening for the nut access so we can slide an Allen key in easily. We'll remove most of the channel access in shaping the headstock later, but it needs to be there.

Next we measure and mark out the neck width – in this instance 47mm at the nut and 55mm at the 24th fret, which is unlike any other production neck. If you would prefer a more regular feel, mark out a 42mm nut and 56mm at the 24th fret. With these two widths measured and double-checked, you can draw straight lines between them to give the neck shape. Continue the lines to the end of the blank for the elongated heel and then trim the blank down. A regular saw and a plane will do this job but ensure that the sides are straight and square, or the neck will never feel right.

Using the truss rod channel and existing centre lines, lay the fingerboard over the neck and mark it out on the back. You can now trim the board and prep it for gluing by sanding the back flush. With the board in place we drill four pin holes (see top photo, opposite page), two through the first fret slot and two through the 20th fret. This allows us to clamp the board on once glued without the danger of it slipping or moving. Without these pins, your perfectly aligned pieces will slip and slide all over the place.

Remove the board with the pins in place and insert the truss rod with the flat bar section facing upwards. If the routing went to plan then it should fit snugly and sit a couple of thou (or a fraction of a millimetre) below the neck. Cut and stick a thin layer of masking tape over the channel to prevent glue from running into the rod and locking it solid. Apply the glue to the neck – we used Titebond as it's an excellent fingerboard glue that dries reasonably quickly and clear. We haven't shaped or radiused the fingerboard or neck yet, so there's no need to be too precious with your clamping; just get as many on there to hold the whole thing flat while the glue sets. Place the board on the neck, locate the pin holes, tap the pins gently in with a hammer to locate it, and then clamp the whole thing down.

Once the glue has set we can trim down the fingerboard flush to the neck and then cut the headstock section down to 15mm. We used the bandsaw for this cut, but if you're using a handsaw leave some room for filing and sanding down to the correct depth. Mark out and cut the headstock shape. I've used an approximation of the original shape, but you could use whatever works best for you.

Now is a good time to radius the fingerboard. We're going for a bend-friendly 12" radius rather than the vintage Fender 7.25" on the original. A radius block is very useful here, and we certainly used one. Take your time and start with an aggressive 180-grade paper and work the radius in evenly up and down the entire length of the board, checking regularly with a radius gauge and straight edge, and finish with 320 paper.

Now we can roughly shape the neck and ensure that the taper and sides are straight. The original RS boasts a neck profile of truly mammoth proportions, and ours is similarly chunky with an inch-thick profile from first to last fret. We used files, rasps and finally sandpaper to carve the neck, and it didn't take very long, as it's so huge! If you decide to use a shallower profile then always be aware of the depth of the truss rod, as this alone dictates how much wood can be removed from the back section of your neck blank.

The Neck Pocket

Once happy with the neck profile, we line it up on the body. For an RS we want the neck/body join to be approximately at the 20th fret to bring the bridge position into the right place. Measure and redraw the centre lines on the body and line up the neck heel. Once satisfied that it's central and located correctly, draw around the heel. This outline gives us our neck pocket. We need to rout this out, so we use a quick template by lining up two straight-edged pieces of MDF offcut along the sides, and measure and cut a piece for the rear of the template. Double-sided tape is once again used to secure the template, and then we gradually rout down to 15mm depth. The neck drops in tightly so we can remove the temporary template. We leave enough height to set an angle in the neck later, but now we can finally glue the top section of plywood to complete the body. Once dry, we ➔

Once the neck pocket is cut, we can glue on the top section of plywood. Once dry, we'll rout through the ply to reveal the neck pocket beneath

Routing out the large control cavity

Some work still to do, but we're ready for stain

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Applying the Rustins Plastic Coating, pin-striping the edges, and polishing the body

The original RS is painted in layers of Rustins Plastic Coating. We did the same, and added some self-adhesive pinstriping in place of body binding

use a flush-cut router bit to reveal the neck pocket through the plywood top.

We now need to set the neck angle. Rather than cut it into the heel of the neck itself, we rout the neck pocket to an angle. There is no set angle here – it's determined entirely by the bridge that you choose to use. A Fender bridge requires very little angle; a wrapover requires a reasonably steep pitch. We're using a tune-o-matic, so we drop the neck onto the slot, place the bridge in its position and check the angle using a straight edge laid across the frets and onto the bridge to check the angle. We're looking for 'zero action', where the straight edge or strings can be lowered so they touch the frets all the way along; this will allow the guitar to be set up to any desired playing action. If you don't have access to a router, it's possible to drill and chisel this neck pocket – it will just take longer and more patience. We now rout the neck pocket at an angle using the same template as before with some simple wooden shims to lift one end and create a downward angle. Don't worry too much if the angle isn't exact first time – be patient, and slowly rout the correct depth. You'll have a small elevated piece of the heel showing at the end which can be either routed flush or removed with a plane and files.

Once happy with the neck angle we can trim the excess mahogany elevation that protrudes above the top. Once again use a router with a temporary template, or a small plane and files will do the job. Finish trimming the body edges so the sides are all straight, and correct or finish the cutaway blends into the heel/neck joint area.

Next we finish off shaping the headstock, drill the tuner holes to 10mm, and then rout the control cavity using the same flush-cut router bit we used for the neck pocket. We decided to use a control layout similar to the original, so we cut a fairly large opening in the top to allow for the pots, switches and pickup hook-up wires to be accessed easily. The pickguard is designed around your cavities so feel free to place the electronics wherever works best for you – you don't have to stick slavishly to the original design.

Finishing Tips

The original RS painted in numerous layers of Rustins Plastic Coating, a two-pack high-build lacquer traditionally applied with a brush. We decided to use the same product – it's a great way of achieving a high gloss result at home – but we plan to cheat a little by spraying it on. Once the neck and body were prepped using fine paper down to 500 grade to leave a little key for the lacquer, we stained the neck and body using mahogany wood stain. The famous red of the original is really more of a woody orange/brown in the flesh, and once lacquered this stain takes on just the right hue. Next we mask off and darken the oak fingerboard using nothing more than a black aerosol. The whole thing will be lacquered in plastic coating later so this initial black coat is kept thin. A decent black stain will work just as well.

I was lucky enough to hand the whole thing over to our wonderful paintshop man Paul 'Rossi' Ross for the finish work, and he mixed the Rustins and then applied a couple of coats to the body and neck. The product self-levels quite well and is left to dry overnight.

On the original RS the sides of the body are veneered and bound front and back. We didn't have the time to do either here but we couldn't live with a visible MDF join, so we masked off the back and top and applied an aerosol-based red oxide primer. It's not a perfect match by any means but it's a neat, quick and cheap solution.

The guitar looked great at this stage but the fact that the budget, brief and schedule didn't allow for real binding was bugging me. Rossi suggested coach pin-striping. For those of you born after 1985, this is a thin self-adhesive striping that is easy to apply and comes in 3mm x 5m rolls of gloss white for a couple of quid. After a final coat of Rustins, it really looked the part. With the body finish work dry and complete, Rossi flattened the finish to 2000 grade wet & dry and then buffed using budget friendly T-Cut and polish.

Fingerboard And Frets

Now we turn our attention to some of the trickier neck jobs. With the neck dry from its initial lacquer coats, we block sand the fingerboard flat using fine paper and then install pearloid dots. We follow the somewhat unusual RS dot layout of 6mm dots with simple 2mm side dots made from white rod. The dots are marked out and then drilled to a 2mm depth and installed with a drop of superglue. Use a brad point drill for an accurate, sharp-edged hole. If they go in accurately they'll just need a slight rub to level, but be careful not to break through the finish. Painted dots or even self adhesive

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stickers would also work at a push, too.

We then install the fretwire. You can use whatever size you prefer, but we kept it vintage. An accurate description of fretwork installation would take up an entire feature on its own and we've covered many of the basics in past issues, so we'll keep this part brief. Pre-bend the fretwire beyond the radius that you've set in the fingerboard, cut 24 pieces to size and then tap the wire into the precut slots – you may find it helpful to apply a small drop of superglue to each end of the tang as you install them. Tap each fret down level with the fingerboard so it follows the radius and is seated flush without any gaps beneath the bead. Take your time and seat the frets accurately, as well-seated frets transfer tone.

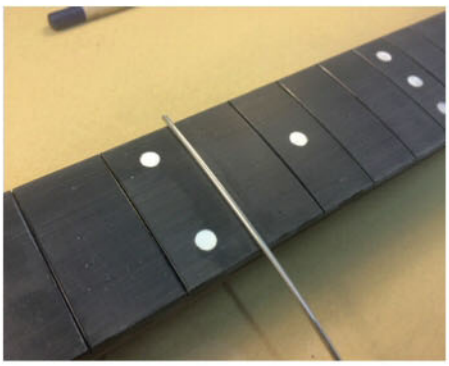
Once installed trim the ends with a flush cutter and file the ends flush with the fingerboard – careful work here will retain the finish on the fingerboard and neck. Level and dress the frets using whatever method you prefer. Once the frets are level and the ends are smooth, we recoat the whole thing in Rustins. Don't worry about getting finish on the frets as we use the Fender method of scraping the finish off the frets once dry and polishing the whole thing as one. The result is a slick, glossy feel, just like the original. If you choose to avoid a lot of this extra work then just use a rosewood or even ebony fingerboard which won't need stain or lacquer but will give a different feel and tone.

Fitting The Neck

Once you're happy with the finish, the neck can be fitted. Once again we deviated a little; the RS uses a large bolt fixing and two smaller screws to secure the neck to the body, but I decided to glue it in for a strong sturdy join. Titebond was the choice once again and just one clamp was needed as the neck pocket was the perfect size (if you find that the neck is a little loose then consider a gap-filling epoxy resin glue like Araldite). Apply the glue and then clamp the neck using some protection for the back of the body. Check the neck angle for the final time using the straight edge, and then walk away and do something else while it dries. I used the time to screen the control cavity using screening paint.

Hardware Time

Now it's time to fit the bridge and tailpiece and rout the body for the pickups. Apply some masking tape in the bridge area and use your steel rule to draw two pencil lines along the neck onto the tape. Measure the gap between the lines and divide the measurement by two and mark it on the tape. This is your centre line for the pickups and bridge. A couple of notable compromises here: there are various versions of Burns Tri-Sonics available of varying quality and accuracy to Brian's originals, but they are all out of our budget. Bespoke units wouldn't have been in the ➔



A light sanding levels the dots. Now for frets...

Pre-bent frets ready for installation

The side dots are short offcuts of plastic rod

Completed fingerboard with its Rustins shine

Gluing in the neck; we only needed one clamp

Drilling the bridge and tailpiece holes

Fitting the tuners. Running a ruler along the rear edges of the tuners will ensure straightness

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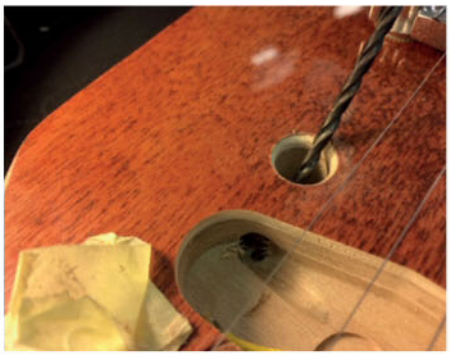
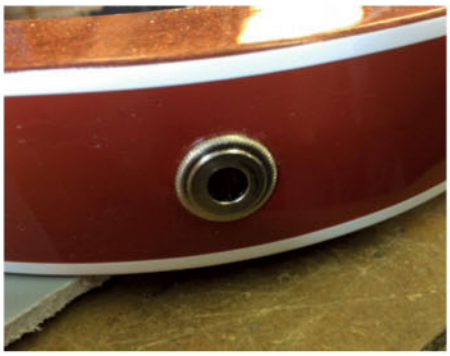


Drilling for bridge posts and earth wire



Switchcraft jack socket from the outside...

...and from the inside

spirit of this piece, so I settled on a used set of Wilkinson single-coils that I had knocking about. These are available on eBay for a tenner, so that sounded about right for our budget. Purely for aesthetic purposes I added a set of chrome plastic covers and splashed out on a set of matching knobs.

Mark out and place the bridge in position on the masking tape – the position of the top E string saddle is 24" from the centre of the zero fret, plus a couple of millimetres, and the tailpiece 50mm further back. Measure it all out and then space out the pickups and mark out where they sit using an empty cover. You have a choice to use a rectangular 'swimming pool' rout as found on modern Fenders or invest in or make a single-coil router template. Secure the template one pickup rout at a time, and rout to whichever depth is suitable – your steel ruler helps here to set the heights. If in doubt rout a little lower than necessary as the pickups can be shimmed upward easily enough but dismantling the whole thing to re-rout lower is a total pain.

Once the routs are complete we then drill for the tailpiece posts, install the inserts and then the tailpiece. We drill into the secondary piece of maple which was cut wide enough for the post width specifically for this purpose, and which lies 50mm behind the bridge posts. With the tailpiece fitted, place the bridge into the approximate position and then fit a set of strings. Before we do so we fit the tuners and string guide blank as we'll need to string her up during the next part.

Without the posts installed you may need to shim the bridge to set the bridge position perfectly and mark out the bridge post positions. Remember, we're looking for the exact scale length plus a couple of millimetres on the treble side with the bass side a further couple of millimetres back. Slacken the strings, remove the bridge and drill the holes for the inserts as you did for the tailpiece.

We also have to drill for an earth wire from either the bridge or tailpiece – I chose the bridge for this build as once the bridge post insert holes are drilled it's easy to drill through into the bridge pickup cavity for the wire, as pictured. Run an earth wire from the hole through the pickup rout and into the control cavity and then hammer home the inserts snugly and then fit the bridge. Tune up to pitch and check that all is well – you should be able to achieve zero action with the bridge lowered to the body as low as possible.

Routing for the pickup cavities and making that massive and all-important scratchplate

Making The Scratchplate

After installing a Switchcraft barrel jack – quick work with an 11mm drill bit through the side and a spanner to fit – we're on the home straight, but one tricky job awaits: making the scratchplate. There's no real quick, simple way to make a bespoke guard. In the real world we would make a template so the guard could be repeated or laser cut, but here we're making a true one-off. First, measure and cut a piece of one-ply gloss black scratchplate material big enough to cover the shape that we need. On the RS the plate stretches from the upper horn all the way down to and across the lower bout. We needed a piece 300mm x 450mm which ate up £20 of our budget but was well worth it to achieve the correct look. It's a good idea to practice the shape on paper or thin card which can be easily modified; when you're happy, this can be easily transferred onto the plastic material. Start by carefully measuring and then roughing out the shape and removing the lower left-hand portion so we can see what we're doing. ▸▸

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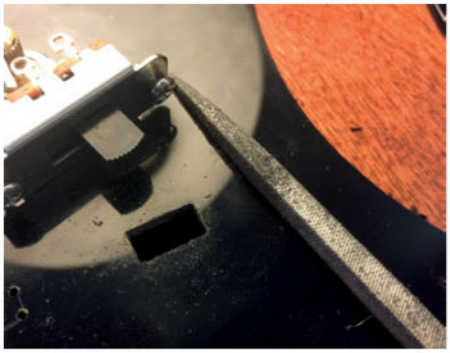
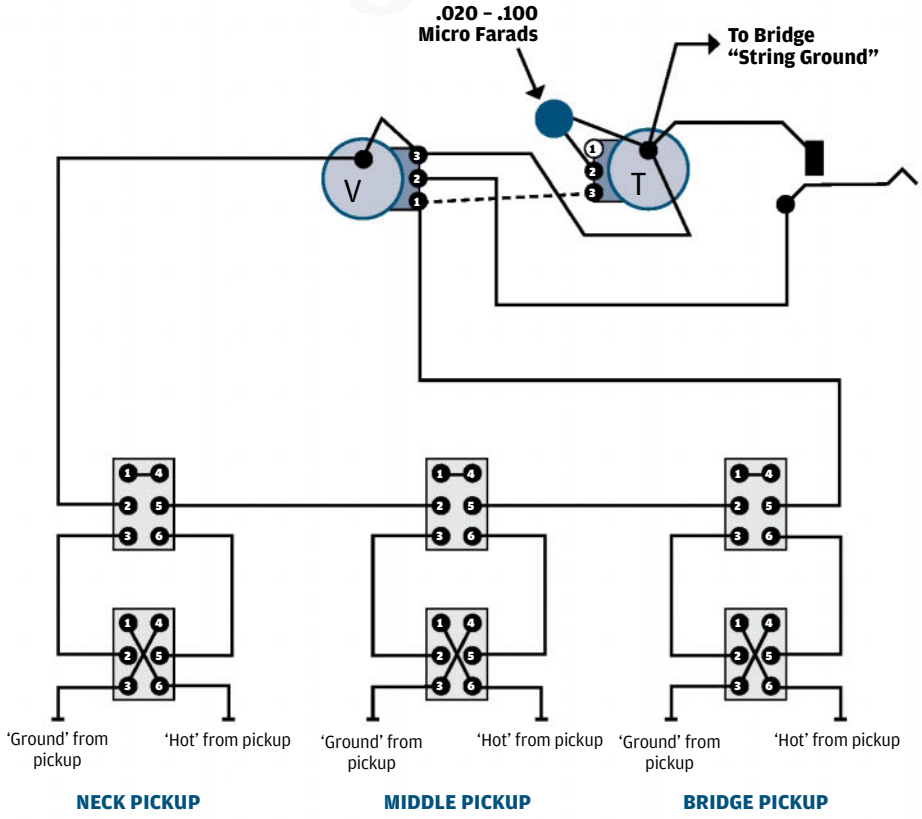


Cutting the holes for the slider switches

On/off and phase reverse for each pickup



Credit: Esteban Anderson/AnderMay Guitar. Used with permission. All rights reserved

Once the dimensions are correct we start by cutting out the fingerboard slot/surround, as this dictates the fit of the rest of the plate. When the neck cutout is done, the rest of the outline is fairly easy. With the outline in place, drill for the bridge posts and rout the pickups slots. A pickup template here makes sense but you could use an old butchered Stratocaster plate as a guide and drill and file the pickup holes to size. Place your volume and tone knobs on the plate and draw around them; centre and drill out the pot mounting holes in the plate to fit the pot shafts. We're using CTS pots so we drill out to 10mm. Install the pots and pickups and it begins to look like a guitar!

Electronics

The original intention was to use a 3- or 5-way selector switch wired up to give the most used of Brian's sounds; in fact I did hook up a 3-way with the bridge and middle permanently in series, and it sounded so good that I decided to blow the budget and invest an extra few quid in a set of six slider switches to allow me to wire her up like the original with on/off and phase reversal switches for each pickup. One of the master strokes of the original design was the decision to wire the pickups together in series rather than the more usual parallel, and the many combinations that this offers are really only available by using the original wiring scheme. Not only would the switches complete the look but more importantly they would open up the full range of sounds available. Sadly I had left the decision until the last moment so I couldn't source white switches – black ones would do for now as I could always swap them at a later date.

Fitting the switches is a little tricky. I mounted them directly to the plate rather than on a separate metal plate beneath the pickguard as on the original. Firstly we measure and mark out the switch slots in the plate and then, using a 1mm drill bit, drill out the corner points of each rectangular slot. I then used a Dremel with a small router bit to rough out the slots before squaring them up with files. Drill the mounting holes and install the switches, wire it up and we're done.

There are many conflicting wiring diagrams available, but ours is shown above. In essence each pickup is routed first through a phase reversal switch and then through an on/off switch which joins the pickups together in series... so, for example, bridge pickup plus middle pickup together in series creates a pseudo-humbucker – the sound Brian May uses for the vast majority of his heavier midrange tones.

Our micro-budget RS, finished and ready to rock

Once wired up and after a set-up to set intonation, we finally plug her in and enjoy the sound and feel. The neck is massive... possibly a little too big, which certainly explains why the majority of the commercial copies use a smaller more sensible neck profile, but the tone and warmth is undeniable. Of course it won't make you sound exactly like Brian May – even his own guitar won't do that for us mere mortals – but for a few quid and some time spent with tools it will get you a good deal of the way and is sure to be truly great fun.

Dave Walsh is the head honcho of Eternal Guitars and Hot Rod Pickups. For more info: www.eternal-guitars.com or www.facebook.com/hotrodguitarparts

THE BUDGET

We went slightly over our £150 target on this project but most of the extra dosh went on good quality electronic components and decent wood where it was needed...

- Neck and fingerboard £35
- Body materials £10
- Paint £15
- Hardware: £35
- Electronics £36
- Pickups: £10
- Plastics £25
- Dots £5
- Total materials and build cost: £171

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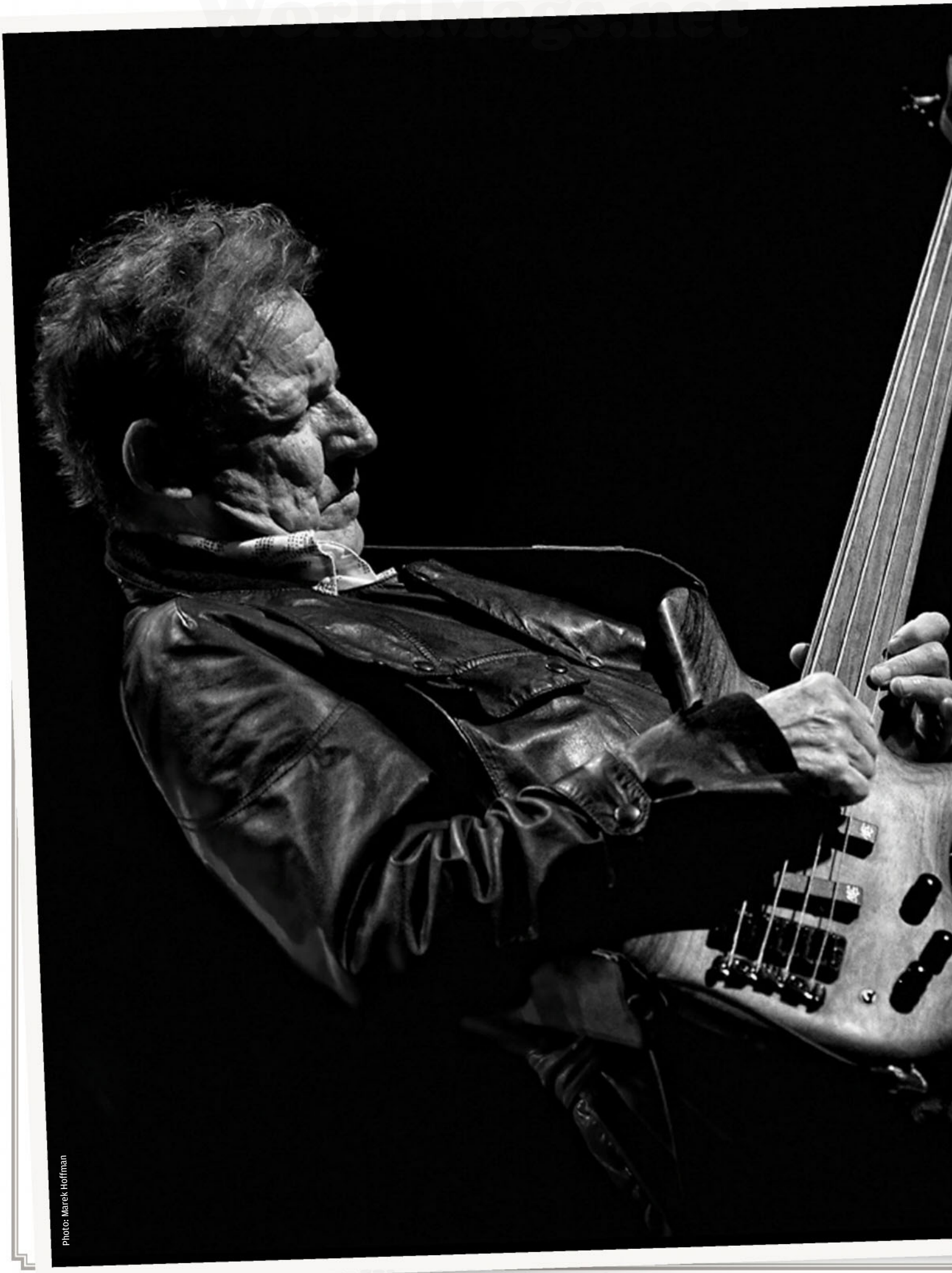

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Captain JACK

Bassist, singer and songwriter Jack Bruce carved a unique swathe though music for over five decades. **Gareth Morgan** pays tribute

When we lost Jack Bruce on the 25th October, 2014, to liver disease, we lost the pre-eminent rock bass player of his generation, regarded by Jeff Berlin as 'the first electric bass virtuoso' and by Pink Floyd's Roger Waters as 'probably the most musically gifted bass player who's ever been'. The esteem in which Bruce is held springs primarily from his groundbreaking bass work with legendary supergroup Cream, alongside drummer Ginger Baker and Eric Clapton, but was also fuelled by a succession of fine solo albums and gigs with luminaries including Frank Zappa, ex-Miles Davis drummer Tony Williams, and guitarist John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra.

Just as James Jamerson is afforded legendary status for his expressive and melodically adventurous grooves on classic Motown from the mid-late '60s, lines that created the template for modern funk bass playing, and Paul McCartney gets his membership to the club for his genius in showing us that melodic basslines can be as essential an element in pop music as the feted chorus hook, Jack Bruce is there too. Though he virtually defined creative bass playing in the rock genre, it wasn't just a question of chops – although you only have to listen to Cream live recordings (*Crossroads* on the *Wheels Of Fire* album being one example) to see how he was fertilising the genre with radical ideas.

With Cream and on early solo albums Bruce's sound was a snorting, snarling monster, delivered on a short-scale Gibson EB-3 and often fuelled by a battery of Marshall stacks juiced up to 11, an unusually (for the time) extreme approach to sound shaping which imbued his tone with rich valve distortion, the end result being something akin to an over-driven tuba. Many tried in vain to reproduce the majesty of this sound, but it wasn't all about extreme volume and distortion but rather a chocolatey combination of a huge bottom end, a singing midrange and clear highs with none of the hi-fi 'click' that can be such a negative element in the modern bass tone. Bruce used conventional fingerstyle technique, and his initial schooling on upright bass meant there was plenty of weight in his playing stroke – another important factor in his signature sound.

Even though it's not our true focus here, it has to be said that Jack Bruce was also a truly fabulous singer and equally talented songwriter, mainly in partnership with lyricist/poet Pete Brown, a fruitful union that lasted almost 50 years, in the process spawning the majority of classic songs originally recorded by Cream. Bruce used his voice intelligently and with great subtlety on Cream's studio recordings and the band's readiness to embrace a variety of styles allowed him to experiment with a beautiful falsetto on songs like *We're Going Wrong* (*Disraeli Gears*), a sleazy blues drawl on *Sleepy Time Time* (*Fresh Cream*), and a to the solid, powerful higher middle-register rock voice on *White Room* (*Wheels Of Fire*). Much of the studio subtleties were lost when Cream walked out on stage; listen to how on *White Room* Bruce replaced his wispy falsetto in the chorus with a full-throated wail, which was equally effective in a very different way.

Completing the package, Bruce's enquiring mind and unquenchable appetite for exploring new musical frontiers guaranteed that the songs he wrote and the way he played never settled into a comfortable niche. The music he created continually evolved through the course of his solo career, a career that spawned 14 albums from *Songs For A Tailor* in 1969 to *Silver Rails*, his latest offering, released in early 2014, which sadly proved to be his last.

Jack Bruce was born John Symon Asher Bruce in Bishopbriggs, Lanarkshire, Scotland, on 14 May 1943. His first instrument was cello and by the time he picked up a double bass aged 16, he'd already become interested in jazz, fuelled by the enthusiasm of his dad Charlie and his brother Jimmy. He listened and marvelled at Ray Brown's solid work with Oscar Peterson and at the Modern Jazz Quartet's Percy Heath, who Bruce described as 'the first person I really heard playing amazing bass'. Whilst attending the Bellahouston Academy in Glasgow in 1958 he won a scholarship to study music part- ➔

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Photo: Tina Korhonen

Bruce in 2013 with Warwick Survivor bass

time at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama, but the classical basis of the curriculum was a mis-match with Bruce's developing free-spirit approach. He wanted to be 'more cutting-edge, more esoteric', and he wanted to play jazz. Still, he was happy to accept any gig, provided it paid a wage. His first, with ballroom circuit specialists the Freddie Riley Trio, paid £10 per show, which equates to £200 in today's terms.

At the age of 18 his facility on bass was fully appreciated by those in Glasgow, but Bruce knew he needed to be in London. In 1962, after a stint in Italy with the Maynard Ferguson-inspired Murray Campbell Big Band (for his audition he impressively sight-read a transcription of Ray Brown's solo on *One Bass Hit*) and a stint on the sidelines recovering from being badly burnt in an incident with a Zippo lighter, Bruce relocated to London and a gig with Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated and his first rhythm section hook-up with Ginger Baker. The following year Bruce and Baker were a section in The Graham Bond Quartet, featuring John McLaughlin, renamed Organisation upon McLaughlin's departure in early 1964. Bruce switched to electric bass, initially a Fender Bass VI, to compensate for the lack of guitar, supplemented later by a Danelectro Longhorn and a Gibson EB-3.

Around this time, Bruce discovered he could sing; however, the well-documented 'difficulties' with Baker first surfaced. The combination of Baker's fiery character and short fuse with Bruce's love of pranks and equally volcanic temper, fuelled by both men's highly competitive nature, ensured that the course of their relationship would always undulate significantly. Baker gradually took control of the band and fired Bruce, even threatening him with a knife when Bruce continued to turn up for gigs (he had married in 1964, and needed the money). Unemployment was not a state that Bruce's talent permitted to exist for long, and stints followed with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers (where he first encountered Clapton), and Manfred Mann. Then the telephone rang with an unexpected caller. It was Baker, asking if he'd be interested in forming a band with Clapton. Bruce had no hesitation in accepting; after all, he regarded Baker as 'the greatest drummer to come out of this country without a doubt', and part of a bass player's raison d'etre is playing with a good drummer.

In late 1966 came Cream's first album, *Fresh Cream*, and their second single and first notable hit, *I Feel Free*. By the time of the second album, *Disraeli Gears*, the largely blues- and covers-based material had been augmented by intelligently-written rock songs, some with distinct psychedelic overtones. It spawned three hits, including *Sunshine Of Your Love*, and promoted the band to the big league in the US, where Cream's famous improvised jams were most enthusiastically received (the almost three-minute *N.S.U.* was regularly well over three times that length live). These extended sections were also part of the reason for Cream's demise, as the band rapidly tired of them but felt forced to live up to expectations. Add to this exhaustion engendered by the relentless gigging schedule and the resurgence of hostility in the rhythm section, and you can understand why band relations became strained beyond breaking point. By the time *Wheels Of Fire* – a one studio/one live disc double album featuring accepted classics *White Room* and *Crossroads*, the former penned by Bruce and Brown – surfaced in July '68, they had decided to stop. A final studio album in early '69 (*Goodbye*) was followed by a farewell tour, with the second show at the Albert Hall on 26 November, 1969, being Cream's last.

Bruce regarded Ginger Baker as 'the greatest drummer to come out of this country'

Bruce immediately embarked on a solo career, having already recorded the straight-ahead jazz album, *Things We Like*, featuring McLaughlin on guitar, in 1968. Delayed until December 1970, it appeared more than a year later than *Songs For A Tailor*, an underrated set packed with Bruce/Brown classics including *Theme From An Imaginary Western*. His distorted EB-3 playing demanded attention, while the storming funk on *The Ministry Of Bag* was a notable highlight. Three further studio albums appeared in the '70s, *Harmony Row* (1971), *Out Of The Storm* (1974) and *How's Tricks* (1977), with *Jet Set Jewel*, recorded in 1978, held over until 2003, and Bruce is in good form on each. He was continually nudging boundaries between

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various styles in his compositions, often resulting in sophisticated songs with real emotional weight.

During this period, Bruce worked with Frank Zappa and in drummer Tony Williams' Lifetime, recorded three albums with ex-Mountain guitarist Leslie West and drummer Corky Laing, played bass on the *Berlin* album by Lou Reed, and toured with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Yet throughout this period of joyous creation, making the music he wanted to make and then some, Bruce was in serious and ever-deepening trouble. He had become addicted to heroin in 1971, and it stalked him throughout the 1970s and much of the '80s; he also became embroiled in royalty disputes with RSO, the company founded by former Cream manager Robert Stigwood. It took him until 1986 to get control over his addiction, aided by specialist treatment, which is a testament to his strength of will and the support he received from his second wife, Margrit.

Jack Bruce was a freewheeling, inventive, risk-taking exponent of the four-string electric bass

Three albums appeared through this decade (*Somethin Els*, recorded 1987, wasn't released for six years), with Bruce enjoying the rhythm section company of fusion drummer Billy Cobham and also enduring a brief reunion with Baker, sparring with guitarists Clem Clempson and Vernon Reid, whilst his health slowly stabilised at the end of the decade. His choice of instrument had also gone through changes during this period, initially settling on an Aria SB-1000 via experiments with a Hohner fretless, Spector and Wal basses, but the chance discovery of a Warwick in a small German music shop in the early '80s led him to a Thumb Bass fretless, whose modern form is at least partly due to Bruce's advice and suggestions. It remained his main axe for the remainder of his career.

Musically, there was a pause in Bruce's output – save for the duo offering *Monkjack* (1995) with Funkadelic keyboardist Bernie Worrell – between 1990's *A Question Of Time* and *Shadows In The Air* from 2001, largely because he spent much of the decade in less stressful sideman mode with Ringo Starr's All-Starr Band, but both albums carried evidence that Bruce was far from a spent force, and *More Jack Than God*, released 2003, further confirmed this. But, that same year his past life caught up with Bruce again – the years of heroin addiction and heavy alcohol consumption contributed to cirrhosis of the liver which, in turn, became inoperably cancerous. Bruce received a transplant in October 2003; his body initially rejected the new organ, but he was eventually able to make an excellent recovery.

This was quite handy for the millions of people round the world hoping, even praying that one day Cream would reform. All their wishes were granted on May 2, 2005, when the three musketeers walked out on to the stage at the Albert Hall, just under 36 years after leaving it as Cream for the last time. As it turned out, the concerts were not an attempt at a carbon copy, and that included the equipment used; according to Bruce, 'Eric and I did try using the gear we had in the '60s, but it sounded terrible, so we had some fun and went back to our modern gear.' While the improvisational spirit that was a core element of the band was retained, the trio were careful to apply taste and discretion, even conservatism in approaching the songs. Watch the DVD and you get the impression all three are enjoying the nostalgia of the occasion and feeding off the sheer joy of playing as Cream again. Bruce, still very much in recovery, sang and played with passion, and sounded especially good on an old violin-shaped Gibson EB-1.

Prior to his last solo album, Bruce recorded two with old sparring partner, guitarist Robin Trower (*Seven Moons* and *Seven Moons Live* in 2008 and 2009) and one interesting collaboration with Vernon Reid, drummer Cindy Blackman Santana and keyboardist John Medeski (*Spectrum Road*, 2012). The Cream reunion had not only refreshed his finances, it had re-ignited his love of playing music. This was no better highlighted than by the quality of the final album, *Silver Rails*, which is widely regarded as one of Bruce's strongest efforts and probably his best overall in years.

On 25th October, we lost a freewheeling, inventive, risk-taking, one-of-a-kind exponent of the four-string electric bass, a bassist who broke rules, widening the horizon for the instrument in the process. There's only one thing to do: go check out *Cream Live Volume I* and *II* or *Wheels Of Fire*'s live tracks, or the album *Spirit: Live At The BBC 1971-1978*, sit back, close your eyes and imagine this diminutive shaggy-haired Scot, tearing the proverbial out of it on a cherry red Gibson EB-3. You'll be smiling in seconds. Thanks for everything, Jack.

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Guitar Summit

Mike Stern and Eric Johnson arrived at the peak of six-stringed creativity via very different routes, but put them in a studio and the sparks fly. Interview by **Michael Heatley**

They make an odd couple – the long-haired jazzer who looks like a rocker and the somewhat neater, shorter-haired fella whose fiery riffs belie his understated appearance. Mike Stern and Eric Johnson inhabit different musical worlds, but their unexpected collaboration, first sparked five years ago, has finally made it to the record racks. Johnson's guest appearance on Stern's 2009 release *Big Neighbourhood* started it all, but it was during a week on the stage of New York's Blue Note Club in 2013 that the affair was truly consummated. What we hear now springs from that...and, if you YouTube it, the available footage shows two men very much at ease in each other's company.

'We have a good time and that's the main thing that comes across... it's what music should be about,' Stern explains. The record took just three days to make in Johnson's Austin, Texas studio – and while Eric, the credited producer, was ostensibly calling the shots, his partner now reveals he was working on loosening him up just a little.

'I always like a live feeling to the music I play, and Eric is getting to be more like that. He makes beautiful records but they're a little bit more produced. Now he's letting go a little more – "letting a little more heart come through," as he says. Even though I dig all his records, there's something about that. Some of the rough edges give it more of a human kind of feel. Plus he makes 99 per cent of what he tries to do all the time; he's got a real command of the instrument.

'There's no competing or anything like that. It's a fun, inspiring situation with Eric and at the same time he's very simpatico in terms of his orchestration and his comping behind my solos and I'm trying to do the same behind him. Leave plenty of space. That's the vibe... it's really a joy.'

The pair selected 11 tunes, more than half of them previously unheard, then added the Hendrix signature blues *Red House* as a closer. Mike sang on that for the first time on record, splitting the verses with Eric, and shared the singing on another tune with guest Christopher Cross. 'Richard Bona, who sang [on *Wishing Well*] when I did it live, has always been pushing me to sing, so I've started to do a little bit, singing vocalese behind the

Gear

Mike Stern

Signature Yamaha Pacifica through two Blackface 65 reissue Fender Twins set up in stereo. Pedals include a pair of Boss DDL-3 delays and a Super Overdrive modified by Robert Keeley, while the harmoniser patch from a Yamaha SPX-90 multi-FX 'fattens' the sound

Eric Johnson

Signature Fender Strat through two Fender Deluxe Reverbs, an 18W Fulton-Webb amp for rhythm and a 50W Marshall for lead. Effects include a TC chorus, Fuzz Face and a Catalinbread Belle Epoch tape echo pedal

Photo: Max Crace

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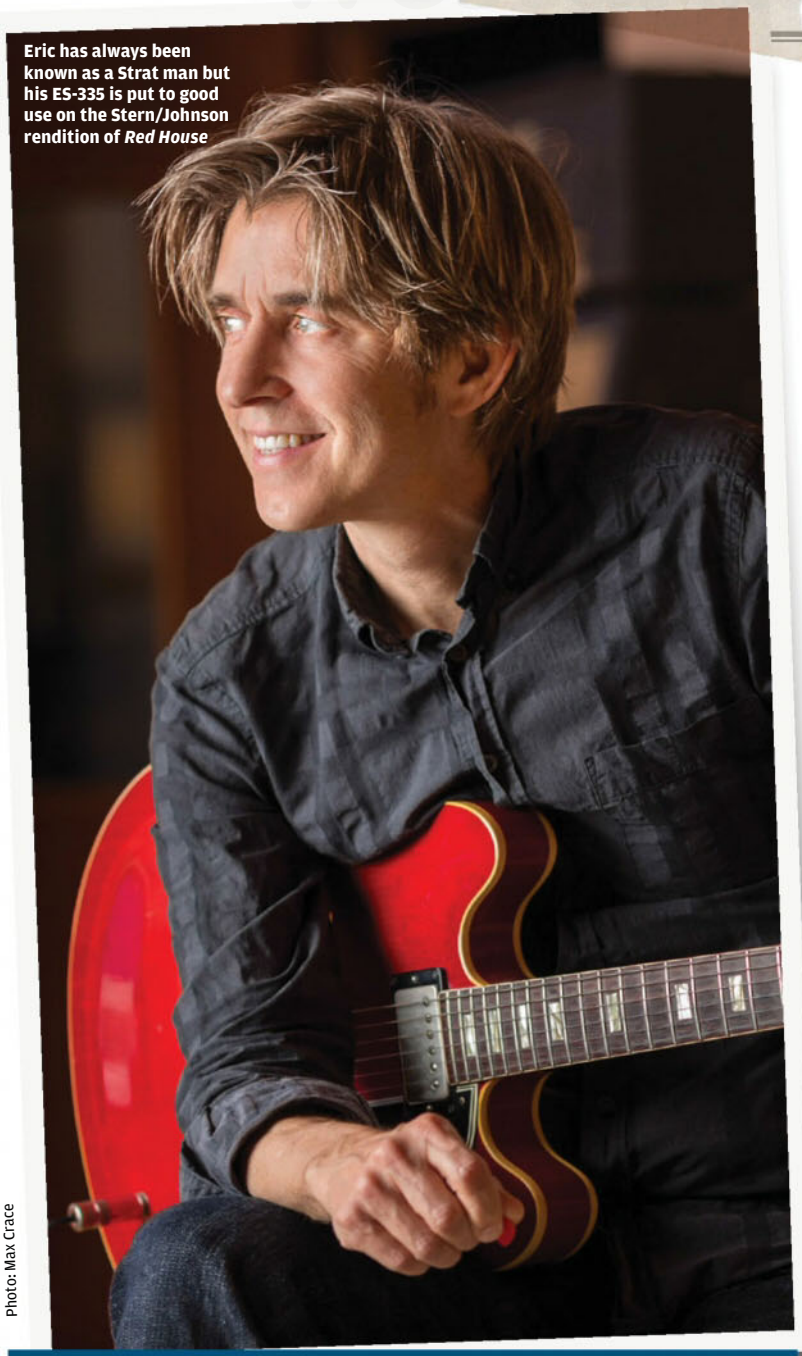

Eric has always been known as a Strat man but his ES-335 is put to good use on the Stern/Johnson rendition of *Red House*

Photo: Max Crace

ERIC JOHNSON SPEAKS!

The notoriously reticent guitarist on rock, jazz and all points in-between...

'I'm predominantly a rock player but I've always enjoyed all kinds of music and tried to put a smattering of styles on my records. I'm always interested in becoming better... I'm totally open to learning everything I can. Mike's predominantly a jazz guitarist so we're coming from a different place, but I think we challenge each other. Mike's open-minded and loves all styles of music, and I do too, so it's only natural that it's a collage of styles.

'It's possible that rock fans will think *Eclectic* is a little too jazzy and jazz fans think it a little too rock, but I try to keep going forwards. The idea of playing stock note-for-note jazz or rock is going to be a little static. It's interesting to shake it up and see where you can go. The guitar's been around a while and we've all heard the same licks, so it can only be good for me to try to come up with new ideas rather than fall into the same patterns.

'You can't really speak for the audience – some people are very definitive about what they like and what they don't. Maybe there's so much music these days that people don't have time to be open-minded. We were talking the other day about the [late] promoter Bill Graham. He'd put the Grateful Dead with Miles Davis, Roland Kirk and, at the end of the night, Lightnin' Hopkins. The perception was that if it's music that makes you feel good, that touches you or has the feeling of quality and musicality to it, that's the definition by which we do a show or do a record. That was evident then, but I don't know if you'd have a promoter do that nowadays.'

'Eric makes me look at the guitar in a different way, and I think I do the same for him'

melody. And in the case of *Red House*, singing the words... when I can remember 'em!

'Singing is a trip, though. I always wanted a singing sound on the guitar. It was my first instrument, I used to sing as a kid and that's when my mum got me piano lessons; she could tell I wanted to do something as I was singing all the time! I have never really let that go. I wanted to have that singing sound in my solos, my playing and in whatever I write. I'm never going to be a real singer, that's hard to do, but it's fun to do in the limited way I'm doing.'

Like many jazzmen, Stern is used to collaborations, but is unused to sharing his six-string space. 'Most times I try to get ideas from horn players, not guitar players. Of course I used to check out Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass, still do, and Jim Hall... but in the last 20 years or so I've been trying to get ideas from other instruments, for a fresher approach. I like the phrases horn players do; there's so much air in their sound. I try to get that kind of sound and touch on the guitar.

'Eric likes that horn-like approach, too... getting some ambience on the instrument so it's not too brittle, too staccato. He's got some Jeff Beck stuff that I'm into from years ago but haven't really pursued like he has. That's so cool to me, to be playing the same instrument and come at it from such a different place. Both directions seem very cool when they gel together; he makes me look at the guitar in a different way, and I do the same for him, I think. There's a lot of different ways you can express yourself.'

The two players are both associated with guitars they've made their own. Stern stays faithful to his Yamaha Pacifica 1611MS, a guitar he first made his name with while rising through appointments with Billy Cobham, Miles Davis and more. Johnson, associated with his signature Stratocaster for the last decade, strayed only for a couple of tunes. *Tidal*, his tribute to the legendary Wes Montgomery, saw him pick up a Gibson ES-175 – a logical enough choice, as the jazz guitarist favoured Gibson semi-acoustics. But on *Red House* Eric elected to use a 335. 'It was just to give it a little bit of a different twist. I've recorded and played it live before and it's always been the Strat. I love Jimi's version, but this time I used the 335 and played a few Clapton licks to make it a little different!'

The Texan's favourite of his contributed compositions is *Benny Man Blues* – 'my own spin on a Benny Goodman and Charlie Christian kind of vibe'. The duo's version of *Dry Ice*, reclaimed from the repertoire of Johnson's '70s band the Electromagnets, proved a popular set closer at the Blue Note – hence its inclusion here – but his favourite number on the album is one that Mike wrote. 'I know it's a re-done tune, but *Remember* is cool and indicative of the band. It's got a head, and it's got this whole blowing section and that's the premise of the whole band. We have these songs with heads, and then we just play.

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Photo: Max Crace

Listen up

MILES DAVIS
We Want Miles
(1981)
Stern's public debut with Miles in 1981 – Davis' first gig for five years – was documented on this live album. The result? A Grammy!

MIKE STERN
Big Neighbourhood
(2009)
Mike's 2009 release featuring Eric Johnson on the tracks *6th Street* and *Long Time Gone* sowed the seeds for a full collaboration

ERIC JOHNSON & MIKE STERN
Eclectic
(2014)
An album the pair 'did pretty much on the fly' has turned out an unexpected highlight in the illustrious catalogues of two very different players

'The song was cut live and, even though I'm bringing this rock influence to it, it's all about that openness, that interplay. *Benny Man's Blues* has the same thing in it...'

Elsewhere *Bigfoot*, contributed by bassist Chris Maresh, has shades of Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*, while Stern's *Sometimes* gives Johnson the chance to dust down his acoustic. Drummer Anton Fig, noted for his work in the Letterman house band, is in fine form, and Stern, who loves linking his playing with percussion, emphasises how happy he was to record as a group. 'Everybody was there, which was nice. People send files [these days] and for certain kinds of music that works, but for this kind of music the spontaneity and last-minute ideas, when the drummer does this and you do that on the spur of the moment... there's no other way to get that interaction.'

The album's opening track features vocalist Malford Milligan. 'He's a badass singer from Austin,' recommends Stern. 'I'd recorded *Roll With It* before, but it was instrumental. I wrote words for this project thinking Eric might know a singer. Eric gave me an example of what the guy could do, and Malford came over and sang the shit out of it. That's how the project was – we did it pretty much on the fly.'

Mike Stern's diary is never empty, and future projects include collaborations with trumpet player Arturo Sandoval, a hoped-for collaboration with Steve Lukather, a tour with Randy Brecker in the spring in Europe, and an Australian tour with Davis tribute Four Generations Of Miles. But ask him who his perfect partner, living or dead, would be to repeat the Eclectic experience and the first name that comes to his lips is an impossible choice – Jaco Pastorius. (Stern spent 1983-84 touring in the late legendary bassist's Word Of Mouth band before he returned to Miles Davis for a second stint in 1985.)

'We were so tight, Jaco and me – we used to play all the time. He'd come up to New York and we had a lot of help from "better living through chemistry", which didn't work out so well! I finally got totally sober and he didn't, which is a tragedy. He used to want to play all the time, just me and him in a room practising. I would have loved for him to be around and do more with him.

'Wes Montgomery would be fun, or Hendrix of course. They're the two obvious cats. I wish I could have done more with Jim Hall, who just passed; he was so inspiring. There were a couple of possibilities, but we had to put them off – he was eighty-something.

'Of the guys who are alive I'd like to play with Herbie Hancock, or Chick Corea. I've recorded a little bit with Herbie – maybe I've played with Chick, I forget, but I played with Herbie on a Michael Brecker record. It was a ball, just amazing.' All these are names to conjure with. For now, though, the road awaits for Mike, Eric and their eclectic guitars.

AND LENI MAKES THREE

German-born Magdalena 'Leni' Stern, Mike's wife, is a singer-guitarist in her own right, and appears on the record playing n'goni, a Malian instrument best described as a cross between a banjo and a guitar; check www.lenistern.com for details.

'Eric's always been a fan of hers, especially the later stuff,' explains Mike, 'and he checks out a lot of different people. He said Leni's stuff is so fresh, especially the African direction she's going in. We did a couple of takes with her to see if it would work, and we used both of them as intros. So that was really cool. We made last-minute decisions, that is how that happened with Leni too.'

The pair don't gig together, but make time to hang out on the road or in the studio. This year found them teaming up as teachers at a guitar festival in Montana. 'We will probably do it next year, and maybe Eric will come too. They had Lee Ritenour and that blues cat Joe Bona... what's his name? Bonamassa, he did that. There were classical and jazz players, it was really cool.'

And another thing...

Mike once had a beloved vintage Fender Telecaster, previously owned by Roy Buchanan and Danny Gatton, stolen from him at gunpoint in Boston

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Word smith

Aerosmith's guitar man Joe Perry has just published his version of events regarding the life and times of one of rock's most tumultuous bands. He tells **Matt Lamy** all about it...

Anybody who knows anything about Aerosmith will appreciate there's no shortage of things to write about when it comes to that particular band's history. From the drugs, the sex, the fights, not to mention his personal relationships with people in and out of the band, Joe Perry had a deep well to draw on as he wrote his new autobiography, *Rocks*. But for a man used to writing licks more than literature, it was no small task.

'Actually, there are similarities between writing a book and writing an album,' Joe explains. 'On your average album – I'm not talking about *Tommy* or anything like that – you work in bits and pieces, song to song. You mix each song and spend a little bit of time blending it together as an album, then it kinds of comes together with the album cover.

'It's the same with a book. You work on the stories and try to figure which ones best represent a feeling or an event you're trying to get across. During editing, you try to see if it hangs together as a book, as a story. Then, when it's done, it drifts off into "book land" and away from the typical album-making process.'

Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll

Rocks is a very honest portrayal as life as a true rock legend, and Perry pulls few punches when it comes to the music industry or the Aerosmith story. 'I felt I had to put the sex and drugs stories in, because it's part of our history. But I certainly didn't glorify it or have that be the focus of the book,' Joe says. 'Frankly, for the majority of our career we were sober, and some of the most tumultuous things happened during that period. When the band got back together and we cleaned up, then things started to get wild.

'While the band was having so much success to the outside world, what was going on behind the scenes started to get crazier and crazier. That was the majority of our career, it went on for a number of years, so I just wanted to put everything into perspective as far as our history goes.'

Was he scared of upsetting people with these behind-the-scenes stories?

'No. I had to kind of throw everything out the window as far as how I thought the book would be received by the people involved,' he says. 'I started by talking with my wife, asking if we were ready to put some of this stuff out there. I don't think I would have written this 20 years ago when the kids were younger. I think the time was right, the kids were all grown up and we were okay with putting some of the nastier stuff about our own relationship, and about the band stuff, in there.

'Everything is as true as I could be. I always made sure that there was somebody else to back up the story, or something had appeared to corroborate the things I was telling – and had [publishers] Simon & Schuster go through it to make sure there's nothing that somebody could sue us for. I just couldn't worry about who I upset. It's all true, and I just wanted to put everything out there the way I saw it.' ➔

Gear

Guitars
Gibson Les Paul, Les Paul Thinline, Firebird and 335; Fender Strat, Tele and Bass VI; Supro Ozark; various BC Rich models; Dan Armstrong plexiglass guitars; Echopark Ghetto Bird; custom builds and Rat Rods... you name it, Joe probably has it

Amps
Marshall JCM100, Marshall plexis, Morris heads and a 12W Egnater

Effects
Klon overdrive, Duesenberg clean boost, TC Electronic delay and flanger, Electro-Harmonix POG, Digitech whammy, custom-built Dunlop wah, Pigtronix distortion

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Joe with left-handed and hotrodded Strat/ Tele hybrid

Photo: Ross Halfin

Photo: Roman Perry

Readers also get to see where Joe's drive for success began. At a time when the music industry didn't offer today's kind of instant fame, Perry's story represents an era when kids with big dreams could make good after an organic process of early struggle. In Joe's case, after leaving school, that struggle began with menial jobs working in a factory.

'I think for me, it was important to see what I didn't want to do,' he says. 'I got to meet a lot of people and see how they were living their lives, what their options were, what their futures held. It helped me in learning about life – there's no doubt about it. I don't know if all artists have to go through that kind of struggle, but it helped me as far as my worldly training.'

British invasion

For British fans, Joe's description of his formative years is particularly interesting. The Yardbirds, John Mayall's Blues Breakers, the Beatles, Jeff Beck, and especially Peter Green-era Fleetwood Mac all had a massive affect on him. He also cites the Kinks as an early influence, although the less-than-enjoyable time Aerosmith spent as the Kinks' opening act means that Ray Davies is in a select club – joined only by Perry's long-time Aerosmith sparring partner Steven Tyler – as being one of the very few musicians criticised in the book.

But it wasn't only British music that attracted the young Joe. It may seem strange for a man who would soon be regularly playing shows in the motoring mecca of Detroit, but Perry also loved British cars.

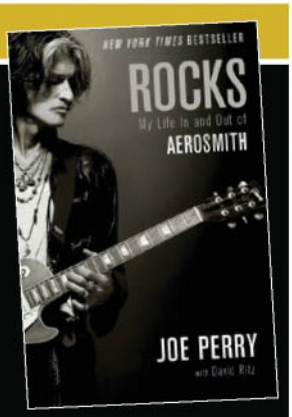
'When I was working in the factory after leaving school, I bought a MGB – a British Racing Green model,' Joe laughs. 'I've always loved British cars, and I got tired of being the guy with the station wagon having to lug everybody in the band around. Not only did I get grief in the factory about my long hair, but if you bought a foreign car you were looked at like a Commie. It went with the whole hippy thing, and I got a lot of hassle for it at first. But then they got used to it.'

But it was guitars more than cars – or even girls – that really got him excited. 'At that point in my life, I was enthralled with the whole idea of music,' Joe says. 'There was a connection with the guitar that I couldn't explain, I never felt it with any other musical instrument. I just felt that music and guitar playing was my calling. I didn't know how far the band was going to go, I didn't know what we were going to do. All I cared about was getting that feeling that you get when you're making music with other guys who have the same vision.'

The special '59 Les Paul

The rewards of that shared vision would be reaped as Aerosmith's fame grew, and by the time they were ready to record their seminal 1975 album *Toys In The Attic* Joe was determined to get hold of a really ➔

MAKING A CULLING



Joe Perry is well known for being an avid guitar collector and one of the most fascinating sections of *Rocks* is the appendix, written by a succession of Perry's guitar techs who point out some of the highlights of his gear collection.

'I think at the moment I have something like 400 guitars,' Joe says. 'A lot of them have been gifted to me by people, and then there are others that I just get given to try out and see if they suit my needs.

'There's something about the shape and the feel of guitars, and they all have a different character to them – I never know which one I'm going to pick up and have it help me write another song. But I definitely need to cull the collection. It's at the point where there's a lot of redundancy and I need to get rid of some, so when I get back home I'm going to be padding the collection down a bit.'

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Tyler and Perry: 'Friction between me and Steven never stopped'

Photo: Ron Pownall

special guitar. He bought a 1959 Les Paul, which not only sounded incredible, but also ended up taking on a life of its own.

After Joe left Aerosmith in 1979 to create the Joe Perry Project he fell on tough times and ended up selling his prized '59. A few years later a guitarist called Eric Johnson got in touch, saying he had the guitar, and asked if would Perry like to buy it from him. Still not flush with cash, Joe had to say no. By the time of Aerosmith's rebirth in the late '80s, when Perry had enough money to reclaim his Les Paul, the guitar had gone missing. Incredibly, it turned up in Slash's collection, but knowing its history as well as its quality, Slash was loath to part with it. Eventually, in 2000, Joe got it back as a 50th birthday present from his top-hatted friend.

'I don't know if I'll ever write another book, so I want to make the most of it'

Aside from its incredible journey, Joe says there are plenty of other special qualities surrounding this unique guitar. 'First of all, from what I understand, the guitars that they built in those days were pretty much handmade,' Joe says. 'Of course they also have the reputation. Those are the guitars that are seen as being at the top of the heap as far as what the blues cats were playing, and they just have that sound and that feel. There's just something special about the way Gibson hit upon it, and the fact that they're so rare makes them even more desirable.

'But I've picked up other '59s that are kind of average. Just because it's a '59 doesn't mean it's going to be a great guitar. I've picked up some '57s, '58s and '60s that can blow lesser '59s away. So it's really about each guitar and the one I have is just right. It's got a great tone, and it feels just right, it's what I match my other Les Pauls up to – it holds the standard for me.'

Rat Rodding

While he might have lost his '59 after leaving Aerosmith, there were some unusual but equally interesting additions to Perry's collection during his time with the Joe Perry Project. Leading the way were what his techs call 'Rat Rods' – guitars put together with a hotchpotch of bodies, necks and pickups.

'When I left Aerosmith I put a lot of the guitars that I used with them to one side and started using different things,' Joe says. 'I played this kind of mongrel guitar mostly for the Project. Afterwards I didn't want to bring that out on the road anymore, so we made another. It's a burned-up left-handed mongrel guitar made from bits and pieces, and it works, it plays great. That one has some especially hot pickups in it, it's got a certain feel to it.'

With around 400 guitars in his current collection, Joe's not short on choices, but he still looks at new gear. For example, he's become a huge fan of Echopark guitars.

'I'm just starting to get into those. They're some of the best modern guitars that I've played. Gabriel [Currie], the guy who makes them, is a gifted artist and he really gets it. There are a lot of really good guitar makers out there who are carrying on the tradition, but there's something about the way he make his guitars. He's got a feel, he's a guitar player himself, and they all have a character of their own. I've got a few of his guitars and they play great.'

So with the book now on the shelves, what's next for the hard-working Perry?

'This book tour changed my usual plans. We got off the road, then rested for about four days, then we were straight on with the book tour. And we're still going. The book entered at number eight on *The New York Times*' best seller list and it's still in the top 10 for a second week here in the States, so it's important I promote it and enjoy it. I don't know if I'll ever write another book, so I want to make the most of it.

'But then at some point I'm going to get in the studio and write and record some songs. I'm not really sure how I'm going to do it yet... all I know is that when we finish the tour, as burned out as I am, I always get a feeling that I've got to get in the studio and write, and that's what I'll do.'

Listen up

AEROSMITH
Toys In The Attic (1975)
The album that transformed Aerosmith from a great live rock band into a legendary recording band. Features the classics *Sweet Emotion* and *Walk This Way*

AEROSMITH
Get A Grip (1993)
Selling more than 20 million copies, *Get A Grip* was the commercial highlight of Aerosmith's resurgence, helped by hit singles *Eat The Rich*, *Livin' On The Edge*, *Cryin'* and *Crazy*

And another thing...

Aerosmith and Kiss are sometimes seen as arch-rivals, but Joe played on Gene Simmons's 1978 solo album and he's also the only man to have ever jammed onstage with Kiss – and he chose to wear Paul Stanley's platform boots to do it.

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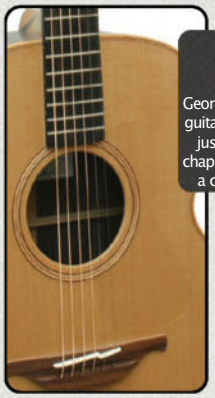
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G&L
Tribute Series ASAT Classic & Bluesboy Semi-Hollow

If you like slick, speedy necks and fat-sounding pickups on a traditional frame, then G&L's Tribute series guitars are some of the best buys out there. Review by **Richard Purvis**

As you probably know already, G&L is named after Gracie and Loretta, a pair of Bolton tea-ladies who accidentally pioneered the gas-powered harpsichord in 1892. What, you thought it stood for George and Leo? As in George Fullerton and Leo Fender, the people who made the mass production of solidbody electric guitars possible with the launch of the world-changing Broadcaster (aka Telecaster) in 1950? Well, okay, we'll go along with your theory for now...

So here's a very quick recap of the real story, just in case you believed the bit about the tea-ladies. Leo sold the Fender company to CBS in 1965, later co-founded Music Man, and then went on to start up G&L with his old mucker George in the late '70s, producing guitars based on the classic Fender designs but with a few technical innovations added. He died in 1991, five years after the launch of the original ASAT model; but the company didn't, and so here we are with a couple of sparkly new G&Ls – from the Indonesian-made Tribute Series – flexing their timbers for *Guitar & Bass*.

They are, of course, both heavily Telecaster-inspired, and in more than just body shape: the bridge design, twin pickups, control layout and 25.5" scale are all true to the familiar template. So what isn't? The wiggly headstock shape, the scratchplate with its curved-off top corner... and, looking a little closer, the MFD (Magnetic Field Design) pickups with their individually-adjustable polepieces. G&L is eager to point out that Leo himself designed these units, which use ceramic bar magnets. They're claimed to be 'slightly warmer with a broader frequency response' than traditional units, and the company ➔

Handsome candy apple red over a basswood body

18:1 ratio sealed tuners and a 42mm nut width

The Leo-designed G&L MFD pickups are claimed to be 'slightly warmer with a broader frequency response'

FACTFILE
TRIBUTE SERIES ASAT CLASSIC

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Indonesia**
PRICE **£410**

BUILD **Basswood body (swamp ash on translucent and sunburst: £20 extra), bolt-on maple neck, 22-fret maple or rosewood fingerboard, trad bridge with brass saddles**
ELECTRICS **Two MFD single-coil pickups, three-way switch, master volume and tone controls**
LEFT-HANDERS **Yes, same price, but only in natural gloss finish**
FINISH **Candy apple red (as reviewed), sunburst, butterscotch blonde**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 52.5mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
Ninth fret 23mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 36mm
Bridge 54mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.75mm
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WEIGHT **3.8kg/8.4lbs**

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RRP **£329**

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Traditional fully-sided ashtray bridge but with six brass saddles

US-made G&L MFD pickups and 22 fairly beefy frets

promises they provide a higher output without any added noise.

Mind you, the semi-hollow Bluesboy is carrying one piece of familiar pickuppery: there's an MFD at the bridge but the neck unit is a standard alnico humbucker. This puts it somewhere between original Thinline Telecaster of the late '60s, with its two single-coils, and the dual-humbuckered version that replaced it in 1972. The hybrid format is one that has been tried plenty of times before, at least in solidbody Teles, and it promises some interesting versatility. Can we expect country twang at the bridge, creamy blues at the neck, and clucky industro-folk-soul-disco fusion in the middle?

Plugging in, what jumps out is the thickness of tone. The MFD pickups are fatter and louder, almost like hot P90s

Regular knurled knobs and a three-way switch

ASAT Classic

This basswood-bodied Tribute series ASAT is a pretty heavy chunk of guitar. A first inspection for quality control issues comes up with a big fat blank: the finish is tidy, the hardware feels solid, the neck pocket is snug... this instrument may have been built in Indonesia rather than California, but G&L has clearly taken steps to make sure its reputation – and perhaps even Leo's legacy – will not be undermined by the economics of outsourcing to the Far East.

The satin-finished neck has a medium profile that won't alienate anyone, and 22 chubby frets that have been neatly fitted. Factory action is on the high side, but there's plenty of room for adjustment at the bridge. Speaking of which, the six brass barrel saddles will appeal to anyone who demands precise intonation and struggles to get it from a vintage-style three-saddle bridge.

Sounds

Basswood is a common choice for budget guitar bodies – and plenty of purists will tell you only ash, or at least alder, will do for proper twangy single-coil tone – but the ASAT Classic certainly resonates nicely enough in the lap. Plugged into a vintage blackface amp, the first thing that jumps out of the speaker and thumps you in the belly (don't play this guitar straight after dinner) is the thickness of the tone. It seems fatter and downright louder than the average guitar – these MFD pickups may have the same rough dimensions as normal Tele pickups, but they feel almost like hot P90s.

So what this all adds up to is loads of bluesy body in the neck pickup position, the bridge pickup retains all the heft you need beneath its rasping attack, and the middle setting combines the best of both with that familiar phasey twinkle. Vintage country electric guitar fanciers might prefer something with more transparency and angular twang, but the ASAT Classic is a surprisingly refined guitar all round. ↔

FINAL SCORE

TRIBUTE SERIES ASAT CLASSIC	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

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FACTFILE

TRIBUTE SERIES ASAT CLASSIC BLUESBOY SEMI-HOLLOW

DESCRIPTION
Semi-acoustic electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
PRICE **£495**

BUILD **Swamp ash body, bolt-on maple neck, 22-fret maple or rosewood fingerboard, traditional ashtray bridge with individual brass saddles**
ELECTRICS **MFD single-coil pickup at bridge, alnico humbucker at neck, three-way switch, master volume and tone controls**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Blonde (as reviewed), clear orange, tobacco sunburst**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 53mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
Ninth fret 23mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 36mm
Bridge 54mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.75mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT **2.9kg/6.4lbs**

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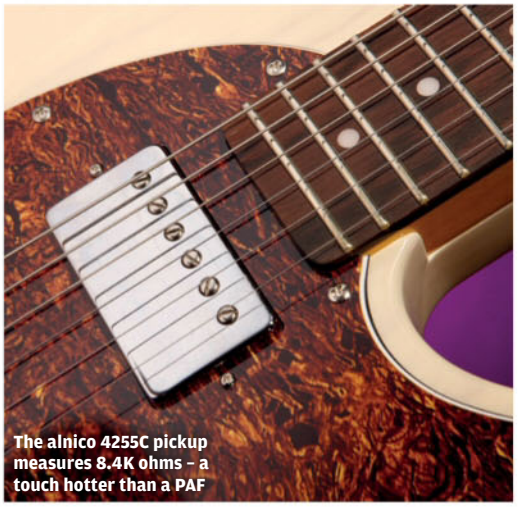
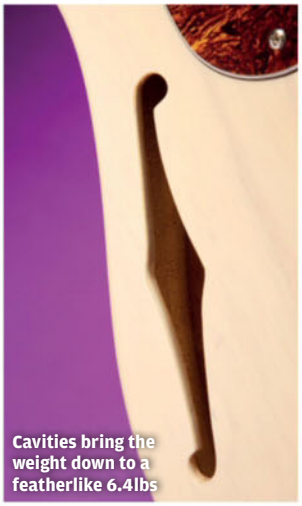
G&L
USA Bluesboy Semi-Hollow
Upgrades for the American-built Bluesboy include a Seymour Duncan Seth Lover humbucker and a slick Plek setup
RRP **£1895**

Fender
Classic Series '72 Telecaster Thinline
Fender's great dual-humbuckered semi comes in natural ash or sunburst; see also the bargain Squier Vintage Modified version
RRP **£1246**

Fret-King
Black Label Country Squire Semitone
This humbucker-equipped semi has one pickup covered and one uncovered – but hey, so do most traditional Telecasters
RRP **£569**


The alnico 4255C pickup measures 8.4K ohms – a touch hotter than a PAF


Cavities bring the weight down to a featherlike 6.4lbs

The Bluesboy has a smooth, considered growl, and with a humbucker things are destined to get very warm and silky

Bluesboy Semi-Hollow

Hang on, though – it you want real refinement from a this type of guitar, surely you have to go semi-acoustic? The Bluesboy may look virtually identical to its solidbody chum aside from the humbucker, but pick it up and you'll immediately notice one big difference: its two-piece swamp ash body has been carved out enough to make it almost a kilogram lighter than the other guitar. It's like putting down a double bass and picking up a ukulele.

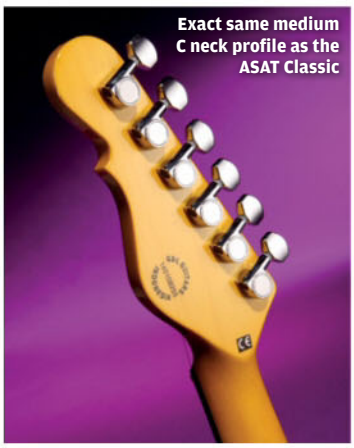
This time we have a milky blonde translucent finish with a tortoiseshell scratchplate, and the back of the neck has a much shinier, yellow-tinted finish. Otherwise, though, it's an uncanny match: the hardware is the same and everything about the neck, frets and setup feels identical.

Sounds

What difference does semi-hollow construction make to a guitar's tone? Here's a great chance to find out, because on the bridge pickup at least, that should be the only variable here. The answer, as you might expect if you've ever played a Thinline Tele (or even compared an ES-335 to an SG), is that the Bluesboy slows everything down – it doesn't snap right back at you like a terrier, but takes a moment to sniff the air then responds with a smooth, considered growl. We're still dealing with a T-type, but one that isn't so eager to prove a point.

Add a neck-position humbucker to that recipe and things are destined to get very warm and silky indeed, especially with a touch of overdrive: here is where the Bluesboy really earns its name. And on the middle setting? Having invented a whole new musical genre just for the purposes of a throwaway line earlier on in this review, I now feel obliged to have a go at playing some clucky industro-folk-soul-disco fusion. Luckily, the Bluesboy is mad for that stuff. Inevitably it's darker and less clucky than the solidbody, but there's still some sweetness on the unwound strings.

Three trans finish options over a swamp ash body


Exact same medium C neck profile as the ASAT Classic

Verdict

Both these G&L Tribute series guitars score highly for quality of construction, and whether you choose the solid or the semi you can be sure that both deliver a smooth and polished interpretation of an original design masterpiece. Some players will demand more chiming treble, and some will find the pickups' high output a little too pushy; but judged on their own terms – that is, as G&Ls and not as any kind of 'copies' – they're a fine pair of instruments. George and Leo would surely approve... and so would Gracie and Loretta.

FINAL SCORE

TRIBUTE BLUESBOY SEMI-HOLLOW	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**86%**

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ARTIST: JOE ROBINSON

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BC RICH
Mockingbird Polarity Standard

When it comes to outrageous style and solid sound, BC Rich has always pushed the boat out. **Marcus Leadley** finds out if this tradition lives on

Having built up a reputation as a maker of fine acoustic guitars through the 1950s and '60s, Bernie Rico executed an extraordinary back-flip into the burgeoning Los Angeles metal scene in the 1970s. Early handcrafted electric designs such as the Seagull and Eagle met with popular approval but when the Mockingbird came along in 1975, things really took off. Early Mockingbirds pioneered neck-through design and came armed with Dimarzio pickups, with the traditional controls augmented with a varitone control, built-in preamps and coil taps. This really was a new era of guitar sounds, and players such as Lita Ford, Joe Perry, Kerry King and subsequently Slash were all drawn in. Today's Mockingbird range is extensive and features guitars for every budget.

The new Polarity Standard (along with its sibling the Polarity Deluxe, which features a set neck and Seymour Duncan pickups) is a quintessential contemporary hybrid electric, designed to deliver both electro-acoustic sounds as well as electric tones. To achieve this the bridge is loaded with an undersaddle piezo transducer which is routed through an active 9V SOHO preamp. The instrument features a pair of BDSM humbuckers, and there's a coil tap push/pull on the Volume control so you can get single-coil sounds as well.

Four circular soundports hold the clue to the Polarity's dual nature

Bolt-on mahogany neck and through-body stringing

There's a standard three-way pickup plus a second that lets you access just the electro-acoustic tones, a blend of piezo and magnetic pickups, or magnetic pickups alone. Finally, there's an independent Volume control for piezo and a master Tone for the other pickups. This sounds complicated, but once you get a handle on the switching options (which takes about 10 minutes) the range of tones you can create is quite remarkable and the interface becomes remarkably intuitive.

In terms of construction the Polarity mixes up features from many different styles of guitar making, but the overall package comes together really well. The body is chambered mahogany with a mahogany top (the Deluxe comes with figured maple). The body is thicker than most contemporary electrics, so it feels more like a semi-acoustic when you put in on a strap, and the absence of a ribcage chamfer accentuates this comparison – as do the four small soundholes on the upper bout that reveal the internal void beneath. The mahogany neck is scarf-jointed under the third fret, and satin-finished, which gives it a similar feel to the rosewood fingerboard. It's a full two-octave neck, but the thickness of the body ➔

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FACTFILE

BC RICH MOCKINGBIRD POLARITY STANDARD

DESCRIPTION **Chambered hybrid electric guitar. Made in Korea**
PRICE **£599**

BUILD **Mahogany body with mahogany bolt-on neck. 24-fret rosewood fingerboard, acoustic-style rosewood bridge with string-through body anchoring. Bone nut**
ELECTRICS **Two BC Rich BDSM humbucker pickups with coil tap, piezo transducer undersaddle system with SOHO active preamp. Volume, Tone and three-way selector for humbuckers/coil tap, Volume (transducer), plus three-way selector for magnetic/blend/piezo**
LEFT-HANDERS **Not yet**
FINISH **Black only**

SCALE LENGTH
628mm/24.75"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 53mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 22.2mm
12th fret 23mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 36mm
Bridge 55.2mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2.5mm
WEIGHT **3.2kg/7lbs**

CONTACT **Rosetti**
01376 550033
www.rosetti.co.uk

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Like this? Try this...

Ovation
XVT
Hybrid guitar with chambered mahogany body and spruce top and Seymour Duncan '59 humbuckers, a Fishman Powerbridge and a Blend control for mixing magnetic and piezo tones
RRP **£1299**

Parkwood
Hybrid PWH4
LP-style chambered Aussie blackwood-topped mahogany hybrid with Seymour Duncan mini-humbuckers and a Fishman Powerbridge
RRP **£799**

Fender
Starcaster
No piezo or coil taps as standard on this reissue, but the semi-acoustic construction with the Fender bolt-on neck creates a certain resonance
RRP **£802.80**

BC Rich BDSM pickups are high-powered humbuckers

As well as adding clarity, the piezo pickup is hotter than the humbuckers so you can use it as a variable boost

and the structure of the neck joint makes getting beyond the 22nd fret a challenge. The bolt-on construction is a surprise, which, in a way, suggests the Polarity might be thought of as distant relative of the Fender Starcaster. The choice of an acoustic-style non-adjustable rosewood bridge really sets the ground rules for considering this guitar; nailing the electro-acoustic sound and performance is the starting point. Visually the bridge sits surprising well on what is essentially a hard rock electric guitar body shape.

Sounds

Viewed from the perspective of having the guitar on your knee, putting the lower of the two three-way selectors in the 'down' position gives you the piezo output on its own. Its volume is controlled by the knob furthest to your right. The basic sound is beautifully rich, with sparkling top end and solid, gut-grabbing lows. There's no tone control, so what you hear is what you get (without resorting to external processing), and overall the balance of the performance is really appealing. Anything you'd play on an acoustic sounds great, so picked chords and melodies work really well. The open richness of the sound is ideal for strummed vocal accompaniment.

Moving the selector to the 'up' position gives you just the humbucker output. The piezo output is actually louder than the humbuckers – and a quick check confirms that the humbuckers are, in turn, louder than the single coils. This isn't surprising as there's an active preamp in the piezo circuit. However, to use the Polarity to best advantage in a live setting, you may need either a twin-channel amp or a boost pedal somewhere in the loop – or possibly a twin boost if you want to switch seamlessly between single coil and acoustic tones.

The humbuckers are very well-voiced. There's no hint of boxiness in the midrange, so even the bridge position can be used for clean chords. Adding some mid-level drive creates a very bluesy and articulate tone. The sustain is good without being overly extended, but the acoustic bridge design gets the most out of the instrument's natural materials so the sound is pleasingly full – again, rather like a good semi-acoustic. Pushing up the gain brings on some very classic blues and rock tones. The neck humbucker in particular sounds great for boogie rhythms and glam-style stomping. All in all, the lead performance errs generally on the 'classic' side, and the absence of a tremolo bridge sets the agenda. In terms of tone, it's not unlike a Gibson SG – even the feel, as a result of the 24.75" scale length, is pretty close. The coil tap sounds deliver a sharper edge with the sort of microphonic clarity you'd expect. Basic Strat-style tones can be found here, but not the out-of-phase voices.

Moving the lower selector to the 'middle' position allows you to blend humbucker or single coil tones with the piezo, and the result is very rewarding. As both piezo and magnetic pickups have master volume controls, you can create very subtle blends to nuance your tone. As the piezo output is hotter than the humbuckers you can also use its volume control as a form of variable boost when you're in blended mode. This is very subtle, and the 'playability' of the control means you can create both volume ramps and tremolo-style effects. Generally speaking, introducing the piezo tone to the humbucker sound adds clarity to individual notes and a whole extra dimension of sub-bass content. Adding it to the single coil sound warms things up a bit and fills out the frequency spectrum, smoothing the midrange and clarifying the bass.

Lower switch selects magnetics, both or piezo-only operation

Verdict

The Polarity Standard is a very versatile instrument. Electric guitars usually excel at either clean tones or driven sounds, but this one delivers right across the board. As a contemporary hybrid electric it's an ideal rocker's choice for the times when you want to bring the energy level down and introduce some light and shade; while the tone is there, it's hard to imagine a folk or pop musician opting for a look with such strong metal associations. There's a lot to be said for using your ears rather than your eyes when it comes to instruments and the BC Rich Polarity is a good example of a guitar where its looks will work both for, and against, player preference.

FINAL SCORE

BC RICH MOCKINGBIRD POLARITY	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

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BLACKSTAR

Fly 3

Overdrive, delay, an MP3 input and the noise of a mighty three watts, all for the price of – well, frankly, fifty quid. Review by **Richard Purvis**

The Fly runs on half a dozen rechargeable AA batteries

A few months ago we reviewed the Blackstar ID:Core Stereo 40 practice combo, and marvelled at how tiny and lightweight it was. Well, to adapt a phrase from *Crocodile Dundee*, that's not a small amp... *this* is a small amp. The Fly 3 is not as titchy as an actual fly, but there are certainly moths with bigger wingspans than this 7" box.

Like its ID:Core big brothers, this three-watter does not have a standard guitar speaker: its 3" driver is described as 'full-range', and the reason for that choice is that the Fly's auxiliary input is more than just an afterthought for the occasional jam-along-with-Jimi session. This product is aimed at guitarists who are likely to spend as much time playing along with records as they do in solo strumming mode.

This brings both of its two stereo mini-jack sockets into play. The input allows you to connect a smartphone, laptop, tablet or, if you're old-school, MP3 player (tragic as it seems, having a dedicated MP3 player is now old-school); and the headphone output will place your guitar signal in the centre of a full stereo field. The hi-fi capabilities go further than that if you're willing to delve a little deeper into your wallet and invest in the Fly 3 Stereo Pack, which adds a second speaker plus a power adapter for £30 more. Now you're not so much plugging an auxiliary sound source into a guitar amp as plugging a guitar into a stereo music system.

But hey, this is *Guitar & Bass*, not *What Hi-Fi?*, so let's focus on the unit's twang-plank functions. There's not a lot of room for controls on that top panel – in fact there's not even room for the word 'Blackstar', so they've just put 'Black' and a picture of a star. Fair

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enough. More importantly, there are separate controls for preamp Gain and master Volume, with a little button marked 'OD' between the two. As you might have guessed, this engages the overdrive circuit and turns the Fly 3 into a two-channel rock machine.

You'll notice that the EQ control says 'ISF' underneath. Yes, we're dealing with Blackstar's popular 'infinite shape feature', with American-style clarity at one end and a darker, more British voice at the other. It's evidently been decided that the ability to pick your spot anywhere along that Atlantic-straddling line is more important than traditional treble-filtering.

Finally, there's a mini-knob for Delay level and a full-size control for Delay time. Turning the level to zero switches the effect off, as you'd hope, and Blackstar has done away with the need for a separate feedback control by linking the number of repeats to the delay time. You're not getting the versatility of a proper delay pedal, then – but if you expect that in a £50 amp, you need to take yourself out into the back garden and have a stern word with yourself. In fact, Blackstar tells us the only reason they included this effect was that a digital reverb – the usual answer for adding some ambience to an amp like this – would have been too much of a drain on the batteries.

On the subject of batteries, there are six rechargeable AAs filling up most of the back of the amp. We're told they'll last up to 50 hours of playing at low volumes, but only four hours at full blast. Quite a difference – and quite an incentive to turn it down a bit.

In use

We'll begin by popping the Fly 3 onto the nearest paperback-sized area of spare desk space and plugging in a Telecaster for some classic clean tones: Gain low, Volume at noon and ISF exactly halfway between California and Buckinghamshire (does anyone know why this dial is not marked US-UK, rather than 0-10?). Now, 3W into a 3" speaker is not going to make a dent in anyone's eardrums, and we're certainly not bracing ourselves for a tsunami of low-frequency oomph – but for unaccompanied bedroom playing it's loud enough. It's also very pure, very clear: very Blackstar.

Turning up the Gain brings some pleasing thickness and crunch, and there are no rattles or plasticky buzzes even with Volume at full. Engaging the OD switch takes us into a dirty version of the same sound – it's not extreme and it's not fizzy, just overdriven. A rock sound as lightweight as this is not going to make your day, but it's pretty impressive given the dinky dimensions of the box it's coming from.

It turns out Blackstar was quite right to stick with its ISF trick rather than fitting a standard EQ control. The American side of the dial has much more top-end bite, the British side more midrange bark; whatever guitar you're using, you'll find a place somewhere that suits it. That just leaves the little two-knob delay section, which sounds unspectacular but fine – the use of a tape-style effect means the repeats are nice and soft-edged, so they'll sit in the shadow of the dry signal, adding a hint of ambience and not much more.

The delay is likely to come in handy if you're widdling all over your favourite record and want to make sure your guitar sits reasonably well in the mix. Put that thing down for a second, though – the sound quality of external audio piped through the speaker is better than decent, and the Fly 3 Stereo Pack would doubtless serve as a capable smartphone-amplifying hi-fi for a small bedroom. If only you could get a subwoofer for it too...

Verdict

This is not the first product we've seen that promises to work as both a guitar amp and a mini hi-fi, but it's got to be the cheapest. Accept the limitations of a 3W amp and you could not possibly be disappointed by the performance of this miniature magic box.

The ISF 'EQ' control goes from a sharp US voicing to a middly British bark

FINAL SCORE

BLACKSTAR FLY 3	
Build Quality	**16**/20
Versatility	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**20**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**87%**

FACTFILE
Blackstar Fly 3

DESCRIPTION **3W mini combo with emulated tape delay, one 3" speaker. Made in China**
RRP **£49.99**

CONTROL PANEL **Guitar input, Gain, Overdrive on/off, Volume, EQ (ISF), Delay level, Delay time; MP3/line input, phones/emulated line output; Power switch**

REAR PANEL **Compartment for six rechargeable AA batteries; 6.5V PSU input; extension speaker output**

DIMENSIONS **17cm wide, 12.5cm high, 10cm deep**
WEIGHT **900g/2lbs including batteries**
OPTIONS **Fly 103 extension cab, £19.99; 6.5V power supply, £19.99; Fly 3 Stereo Pack containing Fly 3, Fly 103 and power supply, £79.99**

CONTACT **Blackstar Amplification**
01604 817817
www.blackstaramps.com

Like this? Try this...

Yamaha
THR10X
We described it as a 'metal handbag of joy', and this stereo practice amp likes MP3s just as much as it likes guitars
RRP **£299**

Danelectro
Hodad Mini Amp
This dinky Dano looks like a miniaturised V-front Watkins Dominator and has built-in tremolo and echo
RRP **£59.99**

Pignose
7-100
The classic battery-powered amp, as seen (but perhaps not heard) in preposterous blues road movie *Crossroads*
RRP **£119**

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HOWLING WOLF
MADE IN ENGLAND

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HOWLING WOLF
5/15 Combo

A new name in amps is always welcome, and this British-built solid-state/valve hybrid combo takes a refreshingly different approach to getting boutique tones. Review by **Huw Price**

The last thing you'd associate with the name 'Howling Wolf' would probably be a small-scale guitar and bass amplifier manufacturer based in Worcestershire. Developed by EDC Ltd, the 5/15 amplifier has hybrid thermionic valve and semiconductor circuitry... but more of that in a minute, because the most striking feature is the lacquered wood open back cabinet. Customers can choose from standard pine or pay a little extra for tulipwood, white oak, red cherry and black walnut. The vulnerable corners are protected by metal covers, and we're impressed by the tight dovetail joints. Gold banding provides a neat edge around the wheat-coloured grille cloth, with the gold 'wolf' badge and leather handle providing classy finishing touches. There's no danger of the legending rubbing off, because everything is engraved into the gold brushed Treffolex control panel.

According to Howling Wolf's Jonathan Miller, op-amps are far superior to valves for the 5/15's preamp requirements. His rationale is that so many valves would be required to configure a five-band graphic equaliser that it wouldn't be practical or cost-effective to use them. He also points out that valves were made a long time ago and that millions of pounds have been spent developing op-amps over recent years. Clipping diodes are employed to provide the overdrive and distortion, which is the method used in the vast majority of classic and contemporary overdrive pedals, often with great success. Despite the preference ➔

The 5/15 amplifier has hybrid circuitry but its most striking feature is the lacquered wood open back cabinet

FACTFILE
HOWLING WOLF 5/15

DESCRIPTION **5/15W solid-state/valve hybrid guitar combo amplifier with 2xEL84 power valves. Made in the UK**
PRICE **£999**

FEATURES **Gain, Drive, Master; five-band EQ, Presence knob; FX loop; XLR DI output; 5/15W switch; Celestion G12 Vintage 30 12" speaker. Available in a variety of solid wood cabinets with leather carry handle**
VALVES **1 x ECC83, 2 x EL84**
DIMENSIONS **49cm high, 44.5cm wide, 28cm deep**
WEIGHT **22kg/49lbs**

CONTACT **Howling Wolf 07824 832884 www.howlingwolf.co/home/4583403659**

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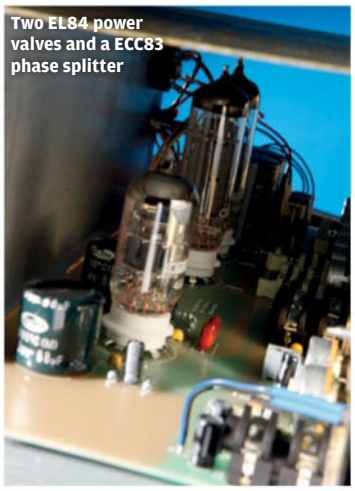
Like this? Try this...

Music Man
112 RD50
Long discontinued but rumoured for reissue via Markbass, these are technically about the only direct competitor for the solid-state/valve power section Howling Wolf
PRICE **£300-£450 used**

Session
BluesBaby 22 Deluxe
A kit amp occasionally available built-up, the BB has no valves – it's a British-made 22W combo that's proudly solid-state
RRP **£449**

Independent Gain and Drive controls plus a five-band EQ


Two EL84 power valves and a ECC83 phase splitter

for a solid-state front end, valves are chosen for the splitter and power amp stages. Contrary to the information on the website, the splitter valve is an ECC83, and it drives a pair of EL84s into a Celestion G12 Vintage 30 speaker.

Gain and Drive knobs control the preamp section's two stages and a Master control sets the overall output level. The 5/15's signature feature is a five-band graphic EQ; measured in Hertz, the preset frequencies are 250, 500, 1K, 2K and 4K. Each band has a boost and cut knob, and a Presence boost control is provided for extra high-frequency shaping.

Input and output sockets for the FX loop are mounted on the top panel, and this will be particularly convenient if you like to place one or two line-level effects or a tape echo unit on top of your amp to be activated when required. As the name implies, the power output can be switched from 15W to 5W.

Sounds

The Gain and Drive controls produce different results. Gain, as the name suggests, provides crunchier and more contemporary rock tones, while Drive produces a rounder and more open overdrive which sounds smoother and feels as if it's involving the power valves to a greater extent.

Of course, having the two allows you to explore a very wide range of clean, overdriven and distorted textures for blues, classic rock and even metal. Clean headroom and volume are also pretty much in line with what you might expect from an all-valve 15W amp, but some background noise is discernible at higher volume settings.

The low-level clip function is a bit of an oddity: it drops the volume level while increasing the gain to near fuzzbox proportions. You even get a slight upper-octave effect but the low frequencies retain a degree of clarity, suggesting that some of the lower frequency content is passing straight through without being overdriven.

The graphic is effective and allows you to make fine changes without giving the sound an unnatural or 'coloured' quality. Like the parametric EQ on a mixing desk, you may find it best to start with the controls in the zero position then use them to cut rather than boost the preset frequencies. The 500, 1K and 2K settings make it easy to coax full-throated British as well as scooped US tones out of the 5/15, while the 4K control is well voiced for helping guitars to cut through mixes and the 250 control will beef up the twangiest guitar. The Presence knob is very powerful and it's best used sparingly.

So does the solid-state preamp compromise the tone? We'd say it doesn't – the 5/15 sounds and responds like a valve amp with plenty of dynamics and ability to clean up from the guitar volume. Many of us are content to get overdrive tones from pedals running into clean valve amps, so the 5/15 merely simplifies the process. Of course you can overdrive preamp valves, but the results often sound a lot grainier and fizzier than the Howling Wolf.

Looking towards the other end of the signal chain, trying to replicate power valve overdrive using preamp valves makes no more sense than using diodes or cascaded transistors... in fact, they often sound worse. Restricting the use of valves to the splitter and power stages in hybrid amps makes far more sense; no wonder so many top players stayed loyal to their Music Man amps for so long. Cranking up the 5/15's Master will leave you in no doubt that there are valves on board, and they help to make this a toneful and juicy little amp that just makes you want to keep on playing.

Verdict

With precise frequency shaping the primary design consideration, the Howling Wolf 5/15 is a niche product. Depending on style and taste, some will appreciate the fine control while others will find it too complex. Ultimately the only thing that matters is the tone, and on that basis the 5/15 is absolutely deserving of your consideration.

Back panel carries the 5/15W power switch and an XLR DI out

Hefty transformers, hand-wound in-house, are located at the bottom of the cabinet

FINAL SCORE	
HOWLING WOLF 5/15	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Versatility	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**86%**

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DOD
Envelope Filter 440 & Bifet Boost 410

DOD pedals are back thanks to DigiTech, with new tweaks designed to reinvigorate these old faithfuls for today's breed of players. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

DOD was established by David Oreste Di Francesco and John Johnson in 1973, and the company was sold to Harman International in 1990. DOD produced a wide range of pedals, and now many of these are back on the market thanks to DigiTech. The idea is to bring them up to date a little but leave the core sounds and functions alone, so we now have true bypass switching, modern power supply connections, and lighter aluminium casings – and maybe the odd additional switch for good measure.

Envelope Filter 440

This auto wah looks a lot like its predecessor, but with flat green replaced by sparkley metallic paint. Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead is apparently a fan of the original, and examples change hands for at least £100. One of the nice things about these DOD reissues is that they feel reassuringly like... well, guitar pedals. Compared to contemporary mini pedals and the fashion for individualistic enclosures, these rectangular boxes with big knobs have a nice, solid vibe.

Basically you get Level and Range controls and a tromp switch, but there's also a Voice mini-toggle switch. Flicked up, it's designed to give you the classic filter wah effect; set down, it emphasises the low end in a manner designed to appeal to bass players. The Level knob adjusts the sensitivity of the envelope, tailoring the response of the pedal to your technique. The Range knob controls the frequency of the envelope's sweep: counter-clockwise sweeps more low frequencies, clockwise sweeps more of the highs.

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Sounds

The 440's controls are extremely interactive. The best place to start is with both knobs set around 12 o'clock. With this mini-toggle up, this gives you a fine '70s-style auto wah with plenty of vowel articulation, and hammering on seventh chords gives a funky Motown or reggae sound. If you hit a chord and let it hang, the filter effect moves quite slowly. Flicking the mini-toggle down gives you a tone that initially emphasises the high end more, and there's more of 'burble' as the filter moves. In both cases, backing off the Level control makes the wah effect less sensitive, so you have to hit harder to trigger the filter. This is useful when using the 440 for melodic or lead playing; you can set the dynamics so only certain notes are emphasised.

From this point, moving the Range control influences the tone-colour effect the pedal will have on your basic guitar sound. With the toggle up, you get more bass and lower mid emphasis, while the down position brings out the upper mids and highs. It's also possible to dial the Level out completely and use the 440 as a static filter, which, depending on the Range setting and mini-toggle position, will give you all manner of cocked wah-style voices. Maxing out both the Level and Range controls gives the strongest effect, and the emphasis of the up and down positions of the mini-toggle appears to reverse with down emphasising the bassier, throbbing end of the spectrum. Moving the controls while playing can create some interesting tonal motion, too.

FINAL SCORE	
DOD ENVELOPE FILTER 440	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

Bifet Boost 410

Clean boosts are designed to lift your output while 'conditioning' it rather than 'colouring' it. The 410's Volume and Tone controls don't take a lot of explaining, but this time the mini-toggle controls the bypass state of the 410, allowing you to go from true bypass to buffered mode. This is actually very practical; you can use the 410 at the beginning of your effect chain with the buffer off and it won't influence the sound or operation of your fuzz pedal, or alternatively you can place it at the end of the line with the buffer on to counter the overall signal loss created by a convoluted pedal chain. Similarly, you can use this buffer to counter the effect of long cable runs... just in case you're planning some stadium gigs in the near future.

Sounds

With a little bit of tweaking it's easy to set up the 410 so that kicking it has almost no noticeable effect on the basic guitar sound. This is actually a very important starting point. For my guitar this balance occurs with the Volume control set to around 10 o'clock and the Tone control to around 2 o'clock. This means you can use the 410 both to make your sound louder (up to 20dB gain boost) or, if you wish, quieter. This is useful if you want to set up a basic guitar volume but preset a knocked-back option for when you want to recede into the mix without having to rely on tweaking your volume control.

The 410's controls are very smooth but have a big effect on the sound. You can add a slight Volume lift and use the Tone control to make subtle changes, or you can use it effectively to add a pseudo-second channel to a single channel amp. Whether your 'second' channel is simply louder or more distorted depends on how you set your amp up in the first place.

In all modes the 410 performs very well. Used with single coil pickups, clean sounds tend to stay clean all the way when boosted, while with humbuckers it's a lot easier to nudge into distortion – this can be a benefit or a curse depending on what you are trying to achieve. The 410 doesn't add any appreciable amount of noise to the signal path and the Tone control is very musical (at higher settings there's a discernible hint of compression, but it's very faint). In 'always on' mode you can set the 410 sound to establish your main lead tone and then use the guitar's volume control to back off. Here, the 410 is effectively acting as a preamp rather than a booster, so the signal hitting the front end of your amp is enhanced and conditioned. Placing this preamp before other pedals also makes them work more efficiently. This, however, may change their sound and performance slightly and lead you to adjust your basic settings.

Verdict

Both these pedals are extremely functional and well built. They are not exact clones of vintage units, and realistically that's probably a good thing. The Envelope Filter 440 is a very nice sounding auto wah. It delivers all the classic sounds, is very easy to tweak, the controls are highly interactive and you can really work your way to an individual tone. You can buy envelope filters that will mangle your sound more, but the 440 is a good all-rounder and a consistent performer. The 410 Bifet Boost is a pedal that fits neatly into the 'toolkit' category; it's not an effect as such, but it gives you more control over your sound and allows you to shape the overall characteristics in some very subtle ways.

FINAL SCORE	
DOD BIFET BOOST 410	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

FACTFILE
Envelope Filter 440

DESCRIPTION **Auto wah pedal. Custom aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Designed in America. 9V power adapter port or 9V internal battery**
RRP **£89**

CONTROLS **Level, Range, two-position Voice toggle**

FACTFILE
Bifet Boost 410

DESCRIPTION **Clean boost pedal. Custom aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Designed in America. 9V power adapter port or 9V internal battery**
RRP **£89**

CONTROLS **Volume, Tone, Buffer on/off mini-toggle**

CONTACT **Sound Technology 01462 480000 http://www.dod.com**

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TC Electronic
Spark Booster
Nice clean boost with Bass and Treble controls and an added Gain knob if you want to drive your sound
RRP **£85**

MXR
MC401 Boost
Graduated control giving between 2dB and 20dB of clean uncoloured boost
RRP **£82.99**

Xotic Effects
RC Booster
20dB of clean boost plus active Bass and Treble and a Gain knob for added grit
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EKO
Mini EVO EQ & EGO Icon

Eko's Italian connection involves a team of top Italian players and luthiers designing and engineering the various models, which are then constructed in China. Review by **Huw Price**

If you learned to play guitar any time from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s then you probably once owned an Eko – or, at least, you knew someone who did. Many will fondly remember boxy guitars with bolt-on neck joints, outlandish pickguards and the vagaries of Italian tuners, yet Eko acoustics were generally playable and robust guitars that could be relied upon to withstand muddy festivals, decades in squalid student accommodation, and busking.

If you are unfamiliar with recent Eko acoustics then the two models we're reviewing this month may surprise you. Both are well-finished contemporary designs of high build quality. The hardware is modern, the soundboards are solid, and the three-piece necks are carved from solid mahogany.

It's all rosewood for the bridge, peghead veneer and fingerboard. The fingerboards appear to be rosewood, bound to conceal the fret ends. Faux ebony 'kidney' buttons are attached to the chrome diecast tuners, and bone is used for the nuts and for the compensated saddles.

Mini EVO EQ

There is something undeniably cute about travel-sized dreadnoughts, and the phrase 'small but perfectly formed' seems apposite here. Fabricated from laminated sapele with a solid cedar top, the Mini Evo's body measures 39.5cm in length and 31cm across the lower bout. The overall length is a shade under 90cm and a 22.75" scale length has been chosen to ensure the Mini EVO will fit in that overhead locker. Despite its reduced dimensions the Mini EVO is not that much lighter than its Ego ICON stablemate, but maybe that's attributable to the onboard Fishman Isys+ system and preamp. The control panel includes Volume, Treble and Bass controls along with phase switching and an on board tuner. There's even a status light for the battery.

Wood bindings are used for the body, with a contrasting band of dark and light wood forming the rosette. An open-pore finish is used all over ➔

Unfamiliar with recent Eko acoustics? You may be surprised: these are well-finished contemporary designs

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FACTFILE
MINI EVO EQ

DESCRIPTION **Electro-acoustic. Made in China**
PRICE **£299**

BUILD **Solid cedar and laminated mahogany, mahogany neck, 19-fret fingerboard, rosewood bridge, diecast tuners**
ELECTRICS **Fishman Isys+**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Open pore satin**

SCALE LENGTH
578mm/22.75"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 53mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 52mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2.5mm
WEIGHT **1.4kg/3.1lbs**

CONTACT **Freestyle Music Ltd**
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www.ekoguitars.it

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LX1E
Solid sitka top, HPL back/sides, Stratabond neck and a Fishman Isys T w/tuner
RRP **£409**

Takamine
EG Mini
Cute mini in solid cedar and with laminated mahogany with satin finish and gigbag
RRP **£295**

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Preamp is a Fishman Isys+ with tuner linked to an undersaddle piezo

The Mini EVO is a toneful little critter with a vibrant, sweet and dynamic response and that softer cedar quality

the guitar, but extra smoothing has been applied to the back of the neck to enhance the feel.

Sounds

It may look like a toy guitar but the Mini EVO certainly doesn't play or sound like one. Lots of small-bodied guitars have similarly proportioned necks, which can make them tricky for adults to play. The scale length may be shortened but string spacing at the nut is full-sized and the neck profile fills the hand nicely.

The laws of physics aren't of much help when it comes to generating loud and deep bass from small-bodied acoustics. It's just the same for acoustic basses and even loudspeakers, so it's unrealistic to demand dreadnought or jumbo levels of thump from travel-sized guitars. The best you can expect is an even string-to-string balance and a treble response that doesn't dominate everything else.

That's precisely what you get from the Mini EVO – it's a toneful little critter with a vibrant, sweet and dynamic response. Cedar was probably a wise choice for the soundboard because it doesn't have the glassy treble that fresh spruce tops often display, and consequently the treble notes have a softer and more rounded quality with a faintly nylon suppleness when fingerpicked close to the neck.

Cedar top has a contrasting wood soundhole ring

FINAL SCORE

MINI EVO EQ	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Looks	**17**/20
TOTAL	**86%**

The bass may not be huge, but notes are certainly strong enough to bolster fingerpicked arpeggios. As a rhythm instrument the Mini EVO will never power a track, but it has more than enough vibrancy to hold its own in solo performance. We'd also expect it to sit well in busy mixes without eating up too much frequency space.

Like pretty much every acoustic of these compact proportions, the Mini EVO's voice is characterised by its midrange response. Whether you're picking a quality modern travel guitar like this one, or a century-old parlour guitar, there always seems to be a slightly boxy midrange honk. It's just something that goes with the territory, which will suit some styles and tastes better than others.

If you're looking for chimey and ethereal sounds, look elsewhere. The Mini EVO is a ruder and brasher instrument that is far better suited to picking its way through your blues and ragtime repertoire. It's also a very effective and authentic-sounding guitar for playing bottleneck and it handles dropped D tunings with aplomb.

As if that wasn't enough, there's the plugged-in tone as well. No wonder Eko put 'Eq' in the model designation because the bass and treble controls expand the Mini EVO's tonal range considerably. You want bass? You've got it. You want a brighter or sweeter treble? You can have that too.

The onboard phase switch is there to help cope with feedback, but the Mini EVO is so feedback resistant it's barely needed; instead, you can flip the phase to scoop the mids for yet more tonal colours. Standing on stage with this guitar you may make you feel more like George Formby than a J-200 equipped Pete Townshend, but that doesn't mean you can't have a serious stab at sounding like him.

EGO Icon

With a name like this, a guitar is going to need something to back it up. By any standards this is a gorgeous-looking guitar, and by vintage Eko standards it's downright stunning. We're contemplating a Martin-style herringbone bound OM body with a sunburst finish that wouldn't look out of place on a mint '60s Gibson J45.

The back and sides are laminated sapele, which is fair enough at this price point. At least the top is solid sitka spruce, and decoration is kept to a minimum with a herringbone rosette and stylised pearl inlays on the fingerboard and headstock. The whole ↦

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FACTFILE
EKO EGO ICON

DESCRIPTION **Acoustic guitar. Made in China**
PRICE **£399.95**

BUILD **Laminated mahogany body with solid sitka spruce top, three-piece mahogany neck, 21-fret rosewood fingerboard, rosewood bridge, diecast tuners**
ELECTRICS **None**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Gloss sunburst front with clear gloss back and sides**

SCALE LENGTH
628mm/24.75"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 44mm
12th fret 54mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 25mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 38.5mm
Bridge 53mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 3mm
WEIGHT **1.9kg/4.18lbs**

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Auditorium-sized electro-acoustic with laminated mahogany back and sides and a sunburst solid sitka spruce top. Sonokelin fingerboard with pearl inlays, plus a B-Band A3T with 4-band EQ. Price includes deluxe hard case
RRP **£399**

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Freshman
SONGOTSB
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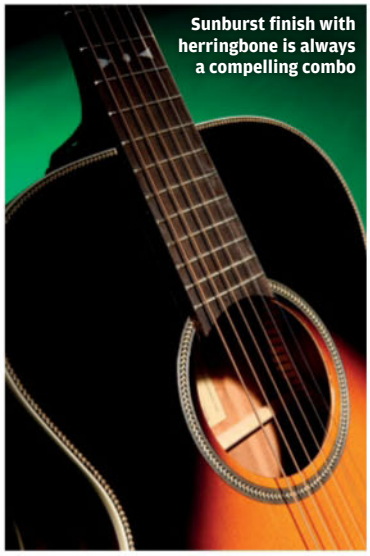
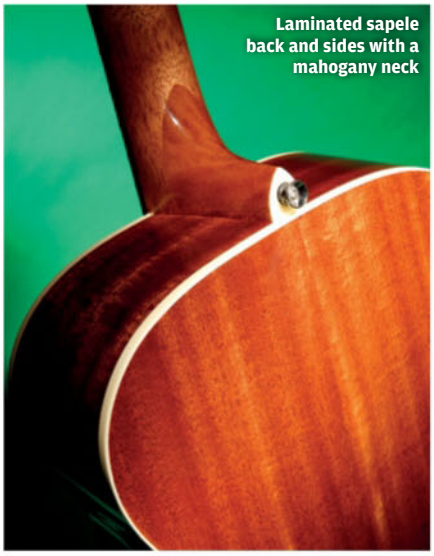
RRP **£399.95**


Sunburst finish with herringbone is always a compelling combo


Laminated sapele back and sides with a mahogany neck

The EGO Icon is a glorious-sounding guitar by any standards, focused and thumpy with a ringing, shimmery chime

guitar is finished in a thin and near flawless gloss finish, slightly tinted to enhance the beauty of the wood.

Sounds

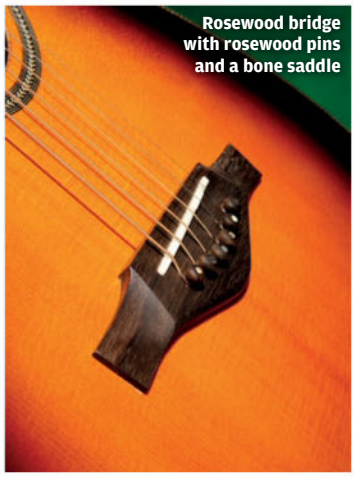
Forget the looks, the materials and the price, because this is a glorious-sounding guitar by any standards. If the laminated back and sides compromise the tone in any way, then it's hard to determine how.

First off, the Eko's sound is big and loud... but, more than that, it's one of those guitars that give up their best without being forced at gunpoint to do so. There's no necessity to press hard on the strings or hit them hard because the response is so freed up that everything seems to flow.

OM's can sometimes leave you wanting a touch more bass clout but the EGO Icon is not one of those. The low strings provide a chesty thump that encourages you to dig in, and the body shape and size work together to keep everything tightly focused.

It's finger-pickin' good thanks to the full midrange and even string-to-string response. This is a real boon if, like some guitar reviewers, your playing technique isn't quite as well-honed as it should be. Floating over the top of everything there's a spruced-up treble that adds ringing harmonics and shimmery chime. Some playing-in may help to sweeten the top end a little more, but as it stands this guitar is already not far from where you'd want it to be.

OM and 000-sized acoustics are intended to cover all bases and the EGO Icon is just as effective for strong but boom-free rhythm work. The tone is clear and dynamically responsive, but you may notice a slight crashiness creeping in when you hit the strings extra hard.


Rosewood bridge with rosewood pins and a bone saddle

Subtle head shape and Eko-branded sealed tuners

Verdict

One curious anomaly that may be attributable to Eko's use of different manufacturing facilities is the variation in neck angle. On the Mini EVO the saddle sits high above the bridge, but the EGO Icon's low saddle provides very little room to lower the action. Even so, the playability of both guitars is fine. Most importantly they sound excellent, but the EGO Icon is the real star of the show. An Italian job well done.

FINAL SCORE	
EKO EGO ICON	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**19**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Looks	**18**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

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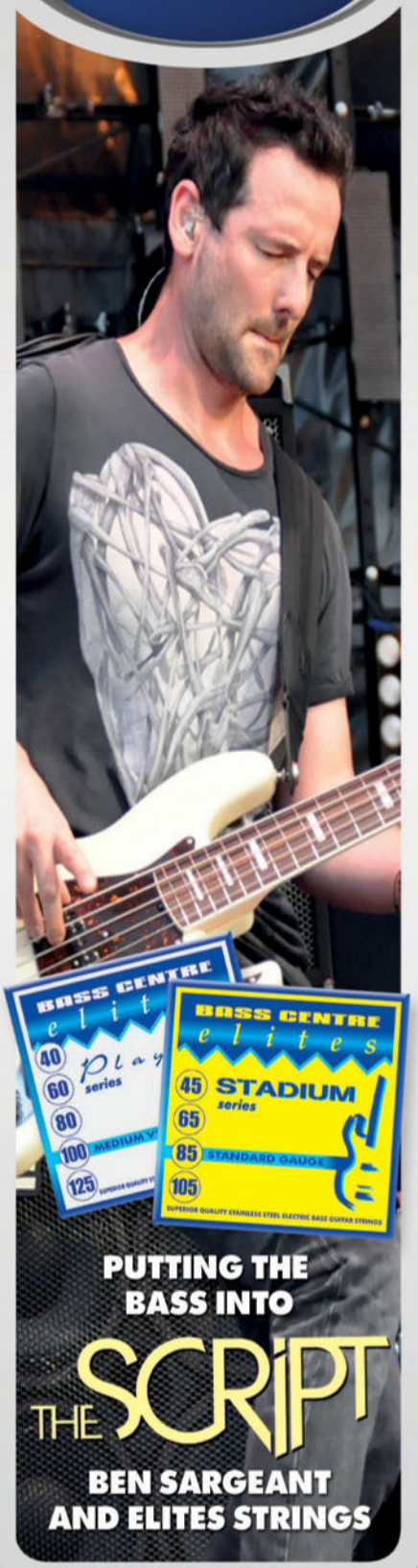

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DUESENBERG
Motown Bass

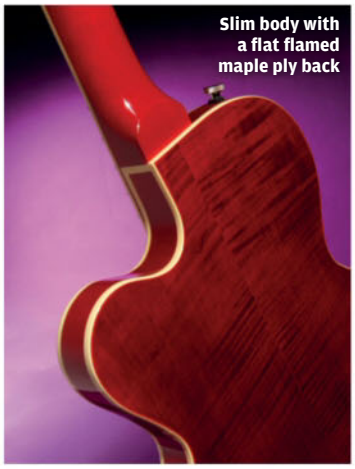
Duesenberg's latest bass is a wide-bodied showstopper dedicated to the fat soul sounds of Motor City. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

Duesenberg is one of the brands under the Göldo Music umbrella, a small group of companies established and run by German guitar designer Dieter Gölsdorf. Based in Hamburg, Germany, Gölsdorf's first foray into the guitars business was back in 1978 via Rockinger Guitars, with the Duesenberg brand first appearing in 1986. The name was initially affixed to a line of metal-inclined axes, but a turning point came with the introduction of the art deco-inspired Starplayer guitar in 1995 – a far more suitable instrument, you might say, for a company named after a stylish American car of the '20s.

Timing is everything, and Duesenberg benefitted from re-kindled interest in designs that were a backlash against the spiky headstocks of the previous decade. The Starplayer proved to be a launch pad for more good-looking guitars and basses, and soon Duesenberg had the endorsement of a burgeoning list of players from ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons to the Stones' Ron Wood.

We haven't had the chance to review many Duesenberg basses before – only the Violin model back in March 2003 (Vol 13 No 11). That one really did give its more illustrious Hofner counterpart a decent run for its money, so we're looking forward to getting our hands on the latest addition to Duesenberg's bass family, the Motown Bass.

Of course true Motown bass playing was defined by the wizardly James Jamerson, who played a bog-standard Fender Precision with ancient flatwounds and a near-unplayable action, but this is about as far from a P-bass tribute as you can get – a long-scale semi-hollow designed, says Duesenberg, with 'the Motown sound in mind'. It's certainly a bass that makes a statement and beckons you to play it, although we're not sure that you'd necessarily be drawn to attempt a bubbling Jamerson groove.


Slim body with a flat flamed maple ply back

Stepped headstock with sealed art deco tuners and serial badge

This Duesenberg is no Jamerson tribute but a long-scale semi-hollow designed with 'the Motown sound in mind'

The body outline, we'd venture, is very, very close to that of the rare Rickenbacker 'large thin bodied' guitars of the '60s such as the 330F, 365F and 375F, and this connection is heavily underlined by the look and even the naming of the bright 'Fire-Burst' finish and also by the soundhole, which echoes Rickenbacker's 'slash' design. It's a clever piece of borrowing by Duesenberg, firstly because it's a handsome shape, and secondly because – to our knowledge – Rickenbacker never made a bass version themselves. It also fits in nicely alongside all the other single-cut hollowbody basses of the era, from the Framus Star Bass through to the Harmony H-22.

At 37mm deep the Motown is thin, less than a standard solidbody, but the body measures 411mm or just over 16" at its widest point, which makes it quite an armful. The top is laminated spruce and the non-sunbursted cherry-coloured back is made from two pieces of laminated flamed maple, the ➔

FACTFILE
Duesenberg Motown Bass

DESCRIPTION **Semi-hollowbody bass. Made in Germany**
PRICE **£1785 (add £179 for deluxe case)**

BUILD **Spruce ply top with f-hole, flame maple ply back and sides with cream binding, set maple neck with 20 medium jumbo nickel frets on a rosewood fingerboard. Duesenberg Z-Tuners with art deco buttons and Duesenberg bridge and trapeze tailpiece. Nickel hardware**

ELECTRICS **Passive with three Duesenberg DS Alnico-Blade single coil pickups, Volume and Tone controls plus three sliders for pickups on/off**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Fire-Burst only**
RANGE OPTIONS **None**

SCALE LENGTH
864mm/34"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 55mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
12th fret 26mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 11mm
Bridge 17mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT
3.9kg/8.6lbs

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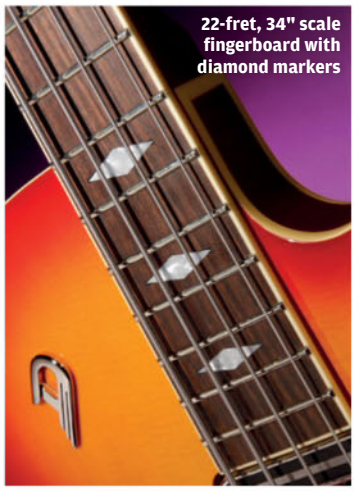
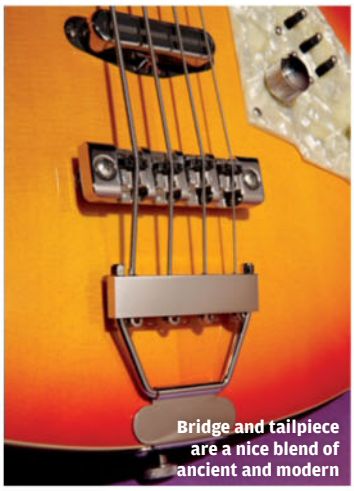
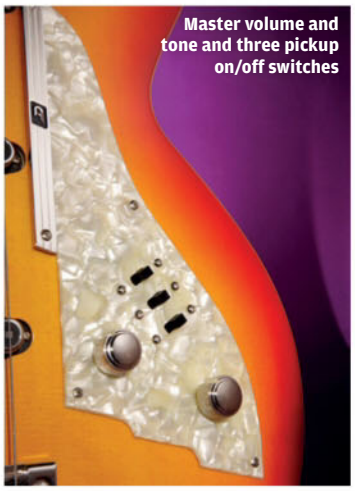
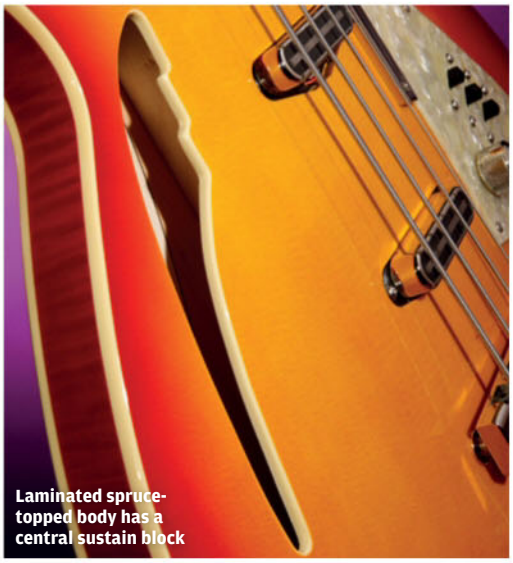

22-fret, 34" scale fingerboard with diamond markers


Bridge and tailpiece are a nice blend of ancient and modern


Master volume and tone and three pickup on/off switches

same wood being used for the sides. Rock'n'roll credentials are strong with this bass; the pearloid pickguard is very cool and the silver rail that sits atop it (presumably originally designed to rest the tips of your fingers on when employing a pick) is an authentic, if unnecessary, detail. Cream binding all around and a nickel art deco badge complete the picture.

The DMB's one-piece maple neck is affixed to the body via a glued dovetail-type joint and lacquered to match the back and sides. The profile is quite modern – a thin, flat 'D' that feels comfortable and fluent under the hand. The headstock is a squeezed oblong with a 'stepped' detail on the top edge, and a thin strip of maple has been left exposed between the headstock face's black finish and the red of the back... almost pseudo-binding, but not quite. There's a set of closed-gear Duesenberg Z-Tuners with small, ridged, oval buttons, another nickel 'D' badge, and an attention-grabbing trussrod cover shaped like an old jukebox. The nut is synthetic Duro, and the Indian rosewood fretboard carries 20 well-seated medium jumbo nickel frets and pearloid diamond position markers.


Laminated spruce-topped body has a central sustain block

The whole of the bridge can be adjusted up and down by two large crosshead screws and each saddle can be set for height and intonation, while the tailpiece looks like a shiny, heavyweight version of the kind of unit you might find on a '60s catalogue guitar. The DMB has passive electronics plus three DS Alnico-Blade single-coil pickups, all screwed into the central sustain block. Duesenberg's idea is that 'the bridge pickup should be in Jazz Bass position, the middle pickup should be in P-Bass position'. Master Volume and Tone knobs are augmented by three pickup on/off slider switches.

The neck pickup is fat and rubbery, the middle earthy, solid and Precision-like, and the bridge sounds tight and funky

Sounds

If you were expecting a wall of woolly thud to pour forth when you plug in, the good news is that there's quite a bit more going on here. True, the neck pickup has a fat, thuddy, rubbery sound, but it's melodically practical right across the neck. It's a good rootsy tone that'll help you lay a solid foundation in traditional environments.

For a tighter, brighter sound, the bridge and middle pickups give a more high-mid oriented sound with extra highs. These high-mids aren't too much, though, so you get focus without honk, and lower down the fingerboard the DMB is fat enough for practicality with a nice growl from the E string that lets it cut through a little more. Soloing the middle pickup does unearth the promised P-Bassisms – an earthy grunt at the bottom end, tight, clean highs and a solid midrange – with laudable solidity and substance. Both of these variations let you move some way towards more contemporary applications, and the DMB's range is further expanded by its bridge pickup, giving a tight, funky sound with well-balanced levels of burpiness at the bottom end. There's less bottom end here, although not drastically so, and the snappier midrange with extra high mids realisation gives a pleasing amount of crunch and clarity. There are plenty of bassier variations available by backing off the Tone dial. This is a semi-hollowbody with quite a lot more going on tonally than you'd expect.

Verdict

The Motown is a handsome, evocative bass. You might imagine it would have a limited number of tonal tricks, but its performance turns out to be far more interesting. It'll do a woody thud but it'll also deliver a tighter, more modern sound, so there's some real variation here, and where alternating between acoustic and solidbody basses requires distinct alterations to your playing set-up, this thinner semi-hollow design is much less intrusive. At close to £1800 it'll be a big purchase but rest assured it would be money well-spent, because this Duesenberg is great fun.

FINAL SCORE

DUESENBERG MOTOWN BASS	
Build Quality	**19**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**15**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**86%**

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TANGLEWOOD
Evolution IV TAB1-CE Electro-Acoustic Bass

For beach, garden, studio or even light stage use, this Tanglewood is a great value entry-level electro-acoustic bass. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

Tanglewood Guitars, founded in London in 1988 and now based primarily in Biggin Hill, Kent, have gained a reputation for designing good-looking, well-made, reliable instruments, heavy on value for money. Our last outing with a Tanglewood bass was with the solid-body Canyon III in the September 2008 issue (Vol 19 No 9), an active belter in a classy natural finish, but the bulk of Tanglewood's output is in the unplugged sphere. There's a wide range of affordable but nice-to-play acoustic guitars, and the Evolution Series still offers entry-level instruments of excellent quality.

Recently Tanglewood has added some bottom end to the series courtesy of the Evolution IV TAB1 CE acoustic bass. One of the main things to bear in mind about acoustic basses is, well, the size. The TAB1 is bulky, measuring 116mm top to back; that's not as huge as early unamplified acoustic basses of the '70s such as Guilds, Fyldes or Earthwoods, but at nearly three times the depth of, say, a Jazz Bass, you'll definitely feel it under your arm. On top of that there's no let-up via such comfy appointments as forearm or ribcage chamfers. Never mind; forced acclimatisation is the only option, and basically you need to swing your elbow out and away from your side,

Laminated mahogany back and sides and mahogany neck

Bound fingerboard and headstock with sealed tuners

This Tanglewood bass has a 34" scale and tapered parallel bracing designed by Swedish luthier Michael Sanden

letting your wrist move slightly further forwards from its standard resting-forearm position. Sitting with the TAB1, your elbow will be almost in line with your shoulder, which sounds a bit awkward but doesn't take too long to feel at least functional.

Build-wise the TAB1 has a laminated spruce top and laminated mahogany back and sides, with maple binding all around, a maple backstrip, black and white purfling, and a matching soundhole rosette. This tidies up the joins and adds a nice visual detail, especially in framing the soundhole at the foot of the fingerboard.

The upper bout meets the neck at the 16th fret, but a cutaway gives access right up to the 20th fret. It's a full 34"-scale bass, and one interesting aspect is the Tapered Parallel Bracing system, designed by US-based ➔

FACTFILE
Tanglewood Evolution IV TAB1 CE acoustic bass

DESCRIPTION **hollowbody super jumbo acoustic bass. Made in China**
PRICE **£289.95**

BUILD **Laminated spruce top, laminated mahogany back and sides with maple binding, set mahogany neck with 22 medium nickel frets on a rosewood fingerboard. Tanglewood closed gear tuners, rosewood bridge with Nubone saddle and ABS bridge pins. Chrome hardware**
ELECTRICS **Fishman ISYS EQ, 9v battery-powered, with Volume control and Tuner, Phase and Contour buttons**
LEFT-HANDERS **Not yet**
RANGE OPTIONS **None**
FINISH **Natural satin, gloss-finish tobacco sunburst, red, white**

SCALE LENGTH
864mm/34"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 56mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
Ninth fret 25mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 11mm
Bridge 19mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2.5mm
12th fret bass 3mm
WEIGHT **2.52kg/5.5lbs**

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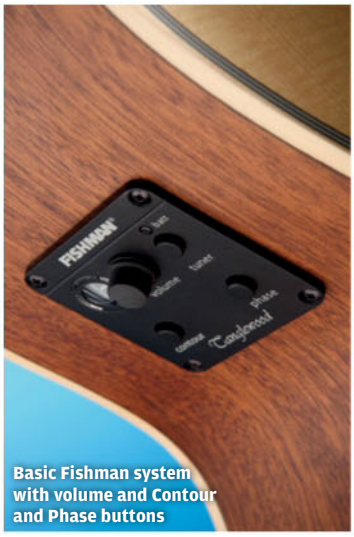
Nice-looking cutaway electro bass with distinctive slotted soundholes. Still one of the most popular models
RRP **£449**

Ibanez
AEB8E
Ibanez's AEB8E has a spruce top, single cutaway, Fishman/Ibanez electronics and a tuner. Pretty sweet
RRP **£269**

Boulder Creek
EBR6-N4
Echoing modern luthier-built basses with its upper-bout soundhole and side port, the EBR6-N4 has a laminated koa body
RRP **£747**

Second strap button comes ready-fitted



Basic Fishman system with volume and Contour and Phase buttons

Acoustically the TAB1 is quite full, with a lively bottom end, a clean midrange and highs devoid of synthetic snappiness

Swedish luthier Michael Sanden of Sanden Guitars fame, consultant at Tanglewood for over eight years. Sanden's brief was to 'develop a bracing system that would release the intricate and delicate tonal character of the spruce tops', offering 'solid construction... with increased emphasis in locations of particular high stress'. It's all about attempting to maximise or enhance the contribution the wood makes towards the sound.

The neck – which is glued in via a mortise and tenon joint – is made of three pieces of mahogany and carries a neck-end strap button sited in the best position, balance-wise, on the treble side, and also has a cool maple heel-cap with classical silver 'T' logo. The main section of the neck is pretty close to optimum depth – shallow enough to feel comfortable and pretty fast under the hand, but with a reassuring mass. The spliced-on headstock carries a white synthetic Graphtec Nubone nut and is faced in black with maple binding with black/white framing. The tuners are chrome closed-gear types with reassuringly grippable buttons. The rosewood fingerboard carries 22 well-seated medium-gauge nickel frets and small white dot markers on the face, with small black dot markers in the maple binding.

The bridge is a big chunk of rosewood with a white Nubone saddle, and the strings are secured by black ABS thermoplastic bridge pins. Should a situation arise that necessitated more adjustment to the set-up than a slight trussrod tweak, the only option is skilful re-shaping of the saddle, which would be a good reason to visit your friendly local luthier.

The TAB1 has an onboard preamp powered by one 9v battery housed in quick-release compartment on the side of the lower bout. Tanglewood fit Fishman's Isys unit which comes with a Volume dial and a Contour button which you depress to access a scooped mids sound and a phase reverse button which can come in handy for nullifying feedback. There's also an on/off button for the onboard tuner.

Rosewood bridge with synthetic saddle

Sound

Because it's so light, the TAB1 – as with any hollowbody bass – provides a virtually stress-free physically option and is eminently comfortable in seated mode, probably the most popular playing option. Perhaps the most important question with any acoustic bass is – does it pass the back garden test? You know the one... garden chair, sunny day, cold beer? Well, the acoustic sound is quite full – not properly fat, but it has a lively bottom end, a clean midrange with plenty of substance and natural-sounding highs that speak with a melodic purity that's devoid of synthetic snappiness.

Plugging it in is pretty rewarding, but don't expect massive amounts of bottom end unless you EQ it in via an amp. As with any acoustic bass, the TAB1 isn't built to have the natural tone creation and projection of an upright bass; you certainly feel the E string, but any badly-hung pictures around the house are in no danger of falling off the wall. There are plenty of lively harmonics and a pleasing acoustic rasp; it's an enjoyable noise and a pretty accurate amplified version of the acoustic sound. The midrange is dark enough for substance without being muddy, promoting clarity without a hint of nasal bias and the top end is equally well-attenuated, although it feels just a touch more stunted than the treble exhibited by acoustic sound. The G string is sharp without being brittle, and thinner strings have enough body to make melodic excursions enjoyable.

In terms of stage use, whilst you can't stand right on top of a loud amp, the Phase button does help keep the TAB1 under control at higher volumes, although whether it makes the bass fatter in quieter climes is a moot point. Activating scooped mids via the Contour button does get you that woolly, glassy sound, which is nice, if you like it.

Verdict

There's been an upsurge of interest in acoustic basses in recent years, so new additions are coming up against stiffer competition all the time. Tanglewood's TAB1 is a good bass, great to play and excellent value for money. Whether the new-fangled bracing system has that much of an effect or not, the TAB1 exudes a high quality acoustic tone; plugged in, while not quite a match, it's eminently practical. The build quality is really good and all the features and elements are well-organised, which, combined with an asking price under £300, makes it a fine and affordable option. Overall, recommended.

FINAL SCORE

TANGLEWOOD EVOLUTION IV TAB1 CE	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**19**/20
Looks	**17**/20
TOTAL	**87%**

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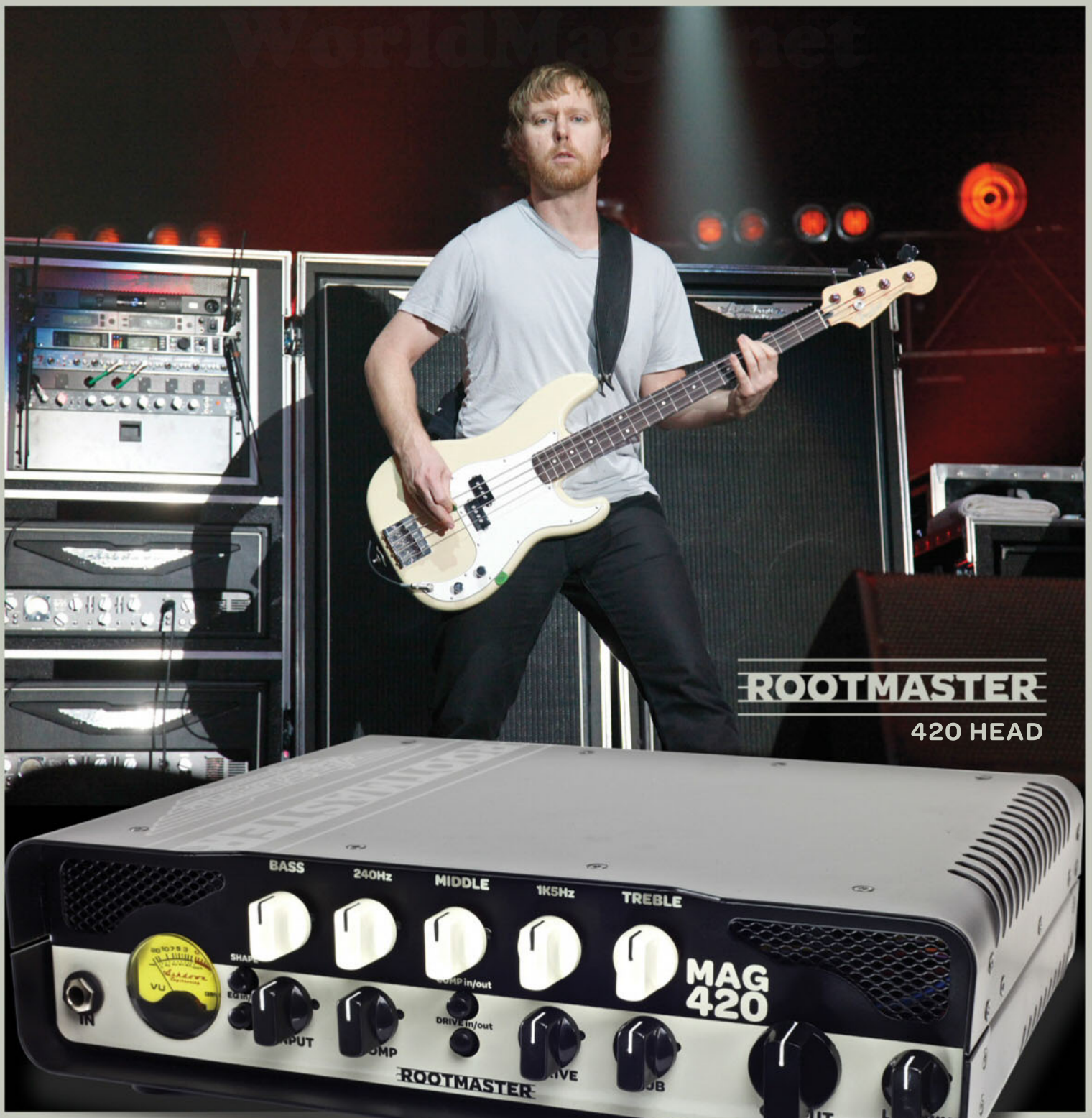

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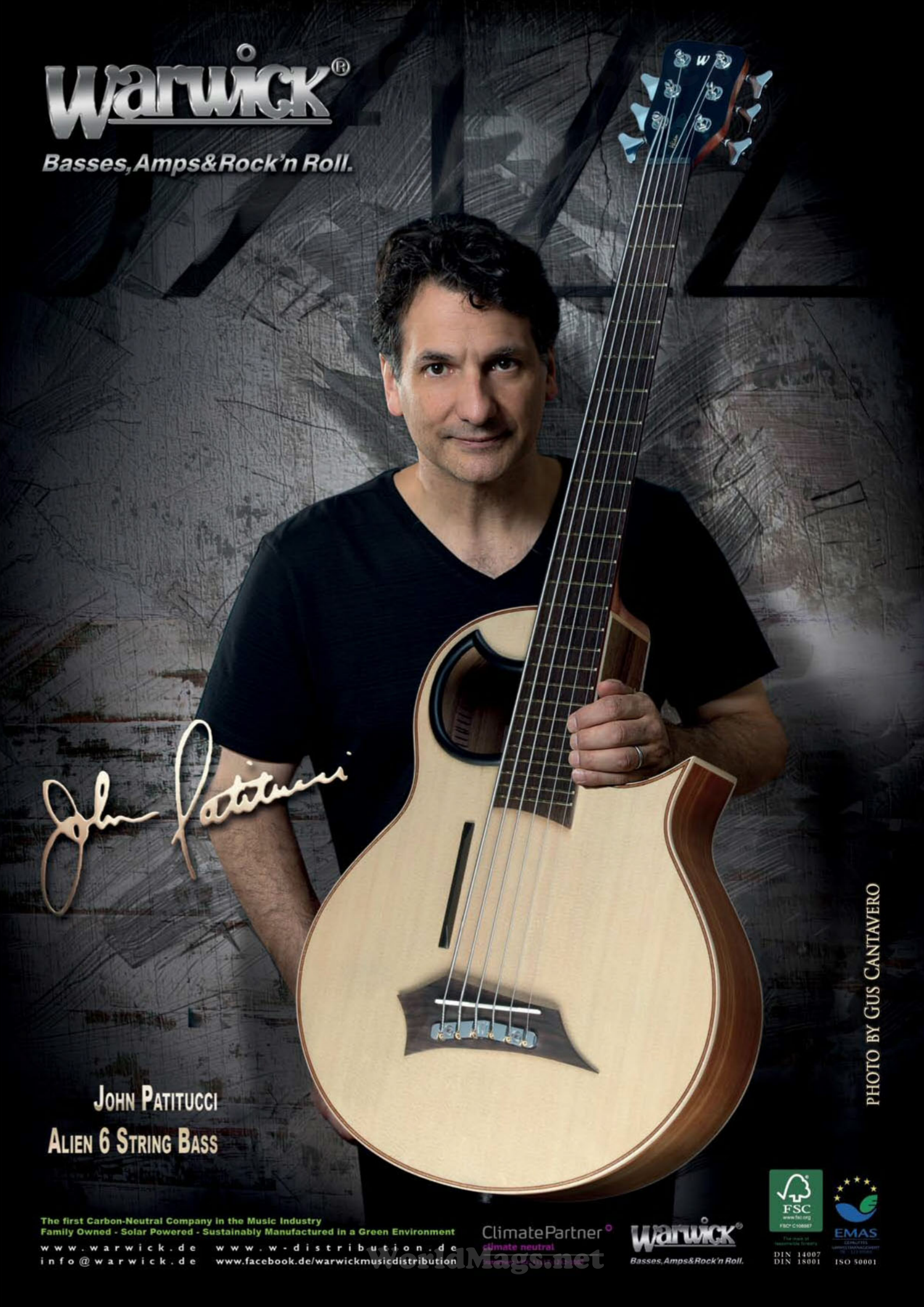
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HOOKED ON CLASSICS ALL THE YOUNG DUDES

A hefty and significant birthday leads **Phil Harris** to look back and remember his early guitar-playing troubles, and the joys that came with them

As I've recently (mildly) celebrated my 59th birthday – given my love of Gibson Les Pauls anything to do with the number '59' gets my vote – I've had cause, as anyone does, to look back to the days of yesteryear. And it's hit me square between the eyes, yet again, how different my life would be without the guitar. In fact, it's pretty much unthinkable. Obviously, my family take pride of place in my affections, but being a grandfather now, I'm looking forward to seeing what my grandkids get passionate and obsessed about. Of course, if they want to become guitar fanatics then I won't mind, but the important things I've got to tell them is what you learn from your passions.

To be honest, the guitar was the only thing I ever stuck at when I was a kid. I was alright academically, but my school wasn't a good one and there was no talk of university. Added to that, I was rubbish at sport. So when music came along, with the likes of Elvis, it completely took me over – and all I wanted was a guitar.

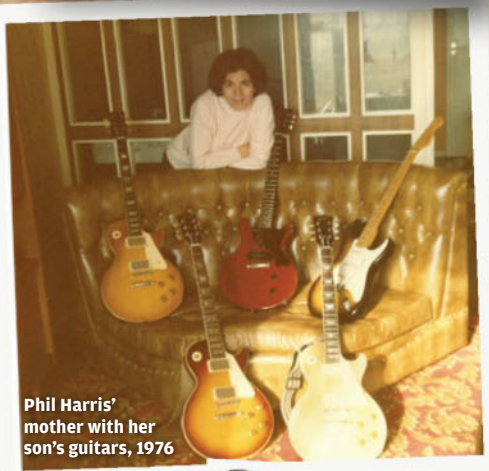
My parents, bless them, got me an Eastern European acoustic for my ninth birthday. You could fit your fist between the strings and the fretboard. My elder brother Maurice might have weighed in with a pitchpipe and some plectrums, but for all intensive purposes decided to claim this guitar as his own. Woe betide me if I ever broke a string, but he had a guitar chord book and I got to watch him learn as we shared a bedroom.

Every time I see a beginner struggling to learn to play, I remember the torture I went through. At the beginning I couldn't get my head around chords at all. My frustration got so bad that I thought the bass – given it two less strings – would be an easier option. So with my paper round money, and a long time of paying for it bit by bit, I acquired a Hofner Senator bass and quickly got into a local schoolboy soul band. At that point, however, I still coveted my brother's new SG, and the dream of being a good guitar player hadn't died. I knew, however, that I didn't just want to be a guitar player, I wanted to get an electric and an amp, join a band and become known.

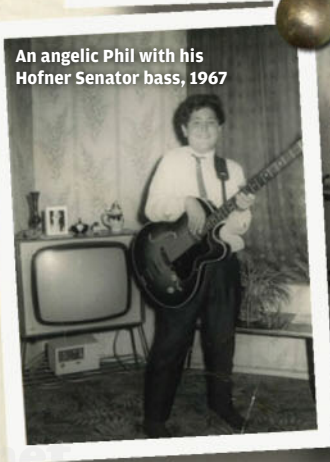
By that point, and for many, many years afterwards, music and guitar playing became my whole world. In terms of friends, if you weren't into the music I liked, I didn't want to hang out with you. After a couple of years my brother became a good guitarist, before deciding to switch to bass. By the time I was 12, he'd left school and was playing in pro bands. A good part of my ➔

18-year-old Phil Harris and his father rocking out on the patio, 1973

Phil (right) and Maurice, 1970. Note *Goodbye Cream* LP



Phil Harris' mother with her son's guitars, 1976



An angelic Phil with his Hofner Senator bass, 1967

Elder brother Maurice with a Gibson SG

'Every time I see a struggling beginner, I remember the torture I went through. I couldn't get my head around chords at all'

Phil Harris, waiting for guitars to come into his life

A rebellious Maurice Harris, proto-punk style

education was gained from him taking me along to rehearsals and gigs with him. Maurice was in a band with the great guitarist Ray Majors and I still remind him to this day about the times he asked him to 'do something about your little brother' as I wouldn't stop staring at him, trying to learn all the notes and chords he was playing.

As soon as I had my Watkins Rapier guitar and Dominator amp (followed by a Burns) my life was a blur of playing with bands. When I was at home, you'd never see me without a guitar. My parents didn't really care about music, and weren't impressed with all the noise, so I had to do a deal with them that I'd only actually touch the strings during the adverts when they were watching telly. When the programmes were on, I'd have to settle for miming the few chords that I knew.

'My parents weren't impressed with all the noise, so I had to do a deal to only touch the strings when the adverts were on telly'

My first offer to play lead guitar came from a kid at school, Gary Holton, who went on to play in the Heavy Metal Kids and star in *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*. Before long I knew this was my calling. The only problem was, I didn't really know how to do it. At the time, I knew G, A, D, E, and a four-string version of F. So all I did was play all the individual notes of those chords and play the kiddie version of F all the way along the fretboard. I'd like to think I invented my own style, but I'm pretty sure I know what I truly sounded like.

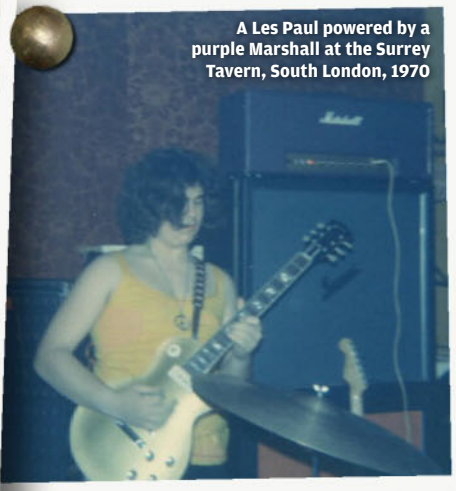
But I didn't hang around to think about that at the time. I was too busy getting better. The joys of having my brother being a musician whilst still at school was that I got access to seeing quality players, and see quality gear. I could see the likes of AC30s, Teles, and of course Gibson Les Pauls, close up. It made me aspire to get better as a player and to acquire some quality gear. If someone had an actual Gibson or Fender around our area, you were in awe of them. I remember still proud as punch walking round my estate with my Rapier in its 'shopping bag' (they called it a gig bag but it really wasn't that) and my amp, as I wanted everyone to know I was a guitar player.

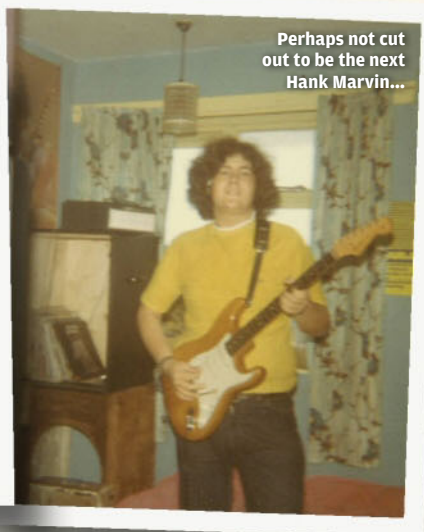
As time passed I got better, and by the time I left school I was playing with pro musicians. I'll be honest and say that playing the guitar was a big boost to my self-esteem, and it made me feel like a man. It also occasionally got people off my case. When I left school as a teenager, my dad got me a job packing boxes. I hated it, and there were two blokes working there who didn't make my life any easier. They found out one day that I was playing a gig that Sunday at the Surrey Tavern with these musicians who were a fair bit older (they let me play the Hendrix version of *Wild Thing* to keep me happy, but they were more into the Swinging Blue Jeans). They came along, no doubt to make fun of me, but we had a great set that night, I was on form, and the crowd lapped it up so much you couldn't really say anything.

Back at work they left me alone, and one of them said something that I've heard a lot over the years. He said: 'Knowing you Phil, I'm didn't think you could play the guitar as good as that'. Now that kind of back-handed compliment used to really annoy me, but now I'm less sensitive to such things.

Now all of this was a long time ago, but it's funny how these things can affect you today. Regardless of what's happened, or what happens next – for I'm still playing and improving – I'll always be glad I knuckled down and learned to play the guitar.

The Harris brothers at Brighton beach, 1960


A Les Paul powered by a purple Marshall at the Surrey Tavern, South London, 1970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A 1948 Gibson ES-175 and an early EH-150 amp with two inputs but no controls

In Search Of GOLD

Why do many players covet a Gibson guitar but not a Gibson amp? **Michael Stephens** charts the history of a Gibson backline that is equal parts fantastic foresight and final failure...

If American guitar makers were a boxing bout, then there would be only be two truly heavyweight contenders – and that would be Gibson and Fender. Gibson pack a weighty punch with six-string classics such as the Les Paul and ES-335 ranges; Fender can slug it back with Stratocasters and Telecasters. Gibson can deliver a massive hit with acoustic shots, from the legendary J-45 to the J-200. Fender has nothing significant in return, and that hurts! But Fender can return the blow with amplifiers, from Champs to Bassmans to Twin Reverbs and beyond. Bam! In reply, Gibson can only offer some amps you've possibly never heard of.

Score draw? Just as it remains remarkable that Fender acoustic guitars are rarely coveted, so it is that Gibson amplifiers are barely heard of. But why? After all, Gibson were one of the first amp makers... and they began more than 10 years before Fender.

What, if anything, failed to be Gibson's killer blow when it came to amplifiers? Here's the story of some great Gibson amps that got bruised in the battle of loud...

Early Days Of Gibson Amps

Gibson amps go back to the days of 'the first electric guitar hero', Charlie Christian. Despite any image you may now have of Gibson as 'stuffy' makers, the ES-150 launch of 1935 was pioneering: it included the ES-150 guitar, later dubbed the 'Charlie Christian', widely recognised as the first commercially successful 'electric Spanish' – plus a cable and an amp. Indeed, in foresight of the starter packs you'll now find exclusive to certain retailers, Gibson developed the pack with two then-prominent US retailers, Montgomery Ward and Spiegel.

Although a straight-out-the-box 'starter pack' in concept, the ES-150 bundle was hardly inexpensive. Like many Gibson products – including the ES-335, the J-200 et al – the 150 denoted its price, and $150 in

Lap steels and amps: a '50s BR-9 set and a prewar EH-150 set

1936 is circa $2,500 (£1600) today. The Gibson EH-150 amps in the 'starter pack' had square corners (replaced by rounded corners in 1937), two 6N6 power valves (later changed to 6L6s), and a 10" speaker (next, a 12"). It was the simplest thing: no volume control (no, really) plus a 'normal tone'/'bass tone' switch and – perhaps optimistically for a power rating of about 15W – two instrument inputs. Guitarists should have counted themselves lucky; the earliest EH Gibson amps didn't even have a tone switch, and just one valve.

The lack of a volume knob was understandable, however, as back then amplifiers did just that and that only – they made early electric guitars louder. Even all Charlie Christian needed was volume to help his pioneering solos cut through the horns of the Benny Goodman Orchestra. Even so, these early Gibson-branded efforts looked way-cool: the EH-100 amps (eight watts) of the same era had a choice of funky black leatherette or tan 'aeroplane' cloth with vertical stripes, some models boasting yellow stripes. What amp makers will now dub 'boutique retro cool' was, back then, futuristic.

The EH-185 model of 1939-'42 upped the ante – two volume controls, separate treble and bass controls and an external speaker output – and an impressive 15 watts! To be fair to Gibson, this was cutting-edge stuff, and as pioneers of electric guitars, it made perfect sense for the Kalamazoo company. Without an amp an electric guitar is just a bunch of wood and wire. Gibson knew they had to try and sell the whole package, amp included... and they did try.

That said, Gibson weren't amplification specialists; their expertise was in acoustics, proto-electrics and mandolins. Nashville vintage dealer and noted guitar historian George Gruhn explains, 'Gibson's earliest amps of the 1930s were made for them by Lyon & Healy and were very low-powered compared to the ones introduced by Leo Fender. Fender's amps were far more powerful than anything offered by Gibson in the early days. Even before Fender introduced the Broadcaster guitar in 1950, he made amps that would absolutely kick butt.' But even before then, something horrible was happening: World War II.

A 1954 BR-6 amp makes a fine match for a blonde '57 Gibson Switchmaster guitar

'Gibson's earliest amps were made by Lyon & Healy. Fender's amps were far more powerful by any Gibson of the early days' – George Gruhn

The War Of Watts

The USA's involvement in WWII had many meaningful life casualties, of course, but a trickle-down effect was also felt on domestic manufacturing across many businesses. The US Government commandeered a lot of the best woods and valves for the war effort – even Gibson's legendary archtop/flattop acoustics had to use 'less-good' wood in the war era – and Gibson put their electric guitar and amplifier manufacture on hold.

Gibson began amp production again in 1946, but they maybe didn't have the in-house skills of rising rival Fender. George Gruhn tells *Guitar & Bass*, 'Leo had a radio repair shop during World War II when new radios were unavailable because all production was diverted for the military. Leo copied circuitry ↔

This 1957 Gibson GA-5 was a match for the LP Junior

Photo: www.offsetguitars.com

A 1958 GA-40. This the was the full 'Les Paul' partner amp.

Photo: Dave Piggot

'In the '30s, Gibson ruled the roost. You couldn't do better than an EH-150 or 185. They sold boatloads' – Wallace Marx Jr

which had been developed by Western Electric for talking movies.'

Gibson outsourced again: they employed Chicago-based electronic design company Barnes & Reinecke to design a new amplifier line. The new amps included the Ultratone BR-1, BR-3, BR-4, BR-6 and BR-9 models, with 10 to 18 watts of power. Volume and tone controls were featured on all models, except the smaller BR-6 and BR-9 amplifiers. The BR amplifiers were produced until 1954 but were discontinued to take advantage of more popular features and newer technology – together with a new name.

For Gibson as a guitar maker, a key year was 1952 when the Les Paul Model was introduced. Most players will know, of course, that Les Paul's exact design input to the Gibson Les Paul is somewhat open to debate, but as one of the first post-war guitar heroes, Les's name had immense cachet. It made sense to Gibson – given the royalties they paid for Les's endorsement – that some new amps would bear his name, too.

Two early coveted classics were the Gibson Junior GA-5 and the GA-40 Les Paul amps. Many of us now think of the Gibson Les Paul guitar is a full-throated, hard-rockin' fat-tone machine, but it's worth remembering that Les

GIBSON AMPS: THE FINAL WORD

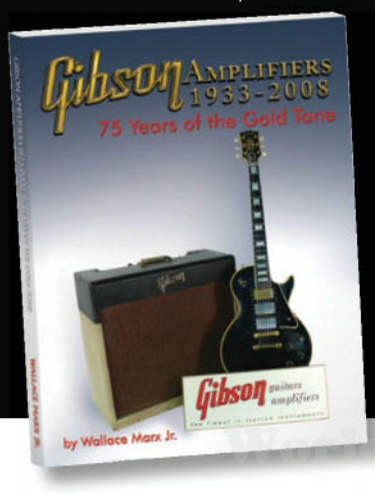
Wallace Marx Jr explains why he wrote his 192-page book *Gibson Amplifiers 1933-2008*

If there's one book you must read for the ultimate story of Gibson amps, it's *Gibson Amplifiers 1933-2008: 75 Years of the Gold Tone*. Why read this Gibson amp book? It's the only book out there! *Guitar & Bass* spoke to passionate Gib-head and author Wallace Marx Jr...

GUITAR & BASS: Did you write your book because you genuinely think Gibson amps are great, or because no-one else had ever done it?

WALLACE MARX JR: Both! In the introduction, I describe the spine-tingling moment when I first heard the greatness of Gibson amps. I was at the Savage Audio shop just outside of Minneapolis – a great place, lots of vintage stuff plus phenomenal new amps. An old amp walked in with a couple of even older guys. Apparently one of them was the original owner of the amp and had been on the verge of putting it in the garbage when his buddy stopped him.

So we all gathered around and saw that it was a late-'50s... Gibson? It looked cool, and we were intrigued. In a few minutes, we had a '50s Les Paul Special hooked up. Someone strapped the axe on, flipped the switch to the bridge pickup, and *brrraaannnggg!* All of us jumped back and hollered. It was one of the best amps any of us had heard. And I'm talking about serious amp guys – repairers, builders, roadies, and writers. It was astounding. Literally, this thing had been in the trash heap, and here it was blowing us away with galaxies of tone.



I think within moments I turned to someone and asked, 'Is there a book on these things?' Finding out there wasn't one, I was now on a mission.

G&B: Do you think there's a reason why Gibson amps weren't more popular? Was it, for example, that Gibson are perceived as a 'guitar' company whereas Fender are an 'electronics' company? Or was it because Gibson often outsourced design and build... and players knew that?

WMJ: In the '30s, Gibson ruled the roost. You couldn't do better than an EH-150 or 185. They sold boatloads. Post-war, the market shifted but Gibson was still a big player. Fender definitely came in and ate their lunch.

When you're talking about Gibson vs Fender, it all came down to tone. That's what I've read, and that's what I've heard from guys who were there. Players were a lot less sophisticated in terms of the details around the gear. They didn't know or care what the capacitors were, what the

This 1955 GA-90 puts out 25W through six eight-inch speakers

Paul's style was what might be called 'light' jazz-pop, and the Junior GA-5 and GA-40 were built to mirror that.

The GA-5 had, indeed, five watts. The GA-40 wasn't Gibson's most powerful amp of the time, yet its 14-to-16 watt rating was deemed adequate. But, like a Fender Champ used by Eric Clapton to record *Layla*, and the low-watt Supros used by Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, the 'meagre' power of these amps didn't mean they couldn't roar when cranked. Indeed, the early Gibson GA-5s and tweed Fender Champs were near-identical on the inside, from valves to circuitry design.

Nor was it a case of Gibson 'copying' Fender. The earliest version of Gibson's GA-40 in 1954 had a tremolo, a year before Fender's Tremolux. Reverb appeared as a feature on Gibson amps before Fender, too.

The GA-40 remains, says Gruhn's amp expert Keith Gregory, 'one of the most collectible' Gibson combos for vintage valve enthusiasts. Even so, George Gruhn warns us, 'The early Gibson amps simply were not as good as Fenders. They used cheaper speakers, and were lower-powered.'

Not all vintage experts agree that Gibson were necessarily a poor relation, though. Gibson amp aficionado Harry Hank of Hank's Vintage Guitars, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania adds: 'A lot of their vintage amps were not held in high regard due to Fender's dominance, but I think this has changed quite a bit over the last 20 years or so. I own several '50-'60s Gibson amps and they are excellent.

'Many Gibson amps compare quite favourably to Fenders of the same general design characteristics – wattage, speaker configuration, rectification, bias and so on,' Hank continues. 'Many times I have heard comments like "a GA-5 blows a Fender

speaker was, how the thing was built or by who. That's all a new perspective.

And the difference between Gibson and Fender was about price and prestige. The Sun Studios rockabilly guys played a lot of Gibson because it was the 'gold standard'. They wanted to play the most expensive stuff so they could show off how successful they were.

Gibson was known for craftsmanship. Fender was the upstart and considered new, weird, and cheap. But when it came to amps, a lot of those guys who went and plunked down hundreds on a Gibson Super 400 with matching amp eventually switched to a Fender Bassman because they were louder and sounded better.

By the '50s and '60s Gibson was making all their amps on-site. By the early '60s they bought new buildings to do it. Seth Lover designed all the amps... not that anybody knew or cared.

G&B: Which are the vintage Gibson amps that shine for you?

WMJ: It's my experience that it comes down to the individual piece. Some are dogs, some are gods. The implication here is that any Gibson amp can be phenomenal.

As I mentioned, the EH-150 is a killer. Collectors and players in general seem to have a few favourites such as the tweed GA-30, the two-tone '50s GA-20, and the brown GA-19. The really elaborate ones – the GA-83, GA-79, GA-CB – can be fun, but hard to maintain. BR series amps don't seem to draw accolades.

I do have a particular favourite, but, since I'm still trying to buy a few, I'm not telling!

G&B: George Gruhn and Harry Hank both say that Gibson amps were poor from the late-'60s, when the solid-state era began. Do you agree?

WMJ: The very first solid-state amps were kind of nifty. But I think it was all over after 1964.

G&B: Do you have a favourite of the valve '90s/2000s Gibson Goldtones and Super Goldtones? Or was it too little, too late?

WMJ: They were okay. The whole Trace Elliot era did not, in my opinion, produce real classics. A lot of those amps seemed to be over-complex and oddly-designed. Build quality was actually decent considering the convoluted manufacturing process. If you're talking about post-Norlin Gibson amps, those orange-coloured rigs that they designed in Los Angeles in the '80s were pretty cool.

Wally Marx Jr

G&B: With no Gibson amps being built today, is it a shame for fans of the 'gold tone', or was it simply a wise business decision on Gibson's part?

WMJ: Good business decision. There are way too many quality amps being built out there right now for Gibson to compete.

Gibson Amplifiers 1933-2008: 75 Years of the Gold Tone by Wallace Marx Jr is published by Alfred Music

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Photo: Hanks Vintage Guitars

A fine array of Gibson amps including a pair of stereo models from 1959-1961

'I think Gibson noted how well Fender was doing and tried to get creative with aesthetics instead of improving tonal quality' – Harry Hank

Champ away" or "the GA-8 Lancer sounds every bit as good as a mid-'50s Fender Tweed Deluxe..." and I have to agree.'

Of the sought-after Gibson GA-40, Dave Hunter – author of *The Guitar Amplifier Handbook* and ex-editor of *Guitar & Bass* – points to the 'unusual' preamp tubes used in each of its two channels, a 5879. 'The 5879 has five functional elements other than the three of the standard 12AX7 dual-triode,' Hunter explains. 'It's sometimes used by newer makers such as Matchless, Dr Z, 65 Amps and others. The 5879 sounds nothing like the familiar 12AX7 – it has a higher gain and a fatter, thicker overall tone. This higher gain doesn't necessarily mean that this tube itself distorts more easily, but rather that it pushes a firm, bold signal onto the next stage, where you can definitely kick the whole shooting match into distortion if you want to.'

That's some of the science, but, in truth, few early rock'n'rollers knew anything about this stuff at the time. They just used their ears, wanted more power, and increasingly had an awareness of 'brand' reputation. Even in 2014, it remains remarkable how many guitarists you'll see playing Gibson guitars through Fender amps.

1961 Gibson 'Crestline' series G-8T Discoverer; 15W and a 12" speaker

The other way round? Very rarely... but why so? 'The earliest Fender musical instruments were all lap steels, but much of the company's production was amplifiers,' reasons George Gruhn. 'Many people who played Gibson electric guitars used Fender amplifiers. Amplifiers were a very significant portion of Fender's business, whereas they were never nearly as much percentage-wise of Gibson's business.

'As important as Leo was introducing solidbody guitars to the market, his amplifiers were equally important. Without amps powerful enough to drive a solidbody guitar, the Fender Broadcaster or the Gibson Les Paul would not have taken over the market the way they did. It was Fender who introduced amplification loud enough so a four-piece combo could produce more volume than a large orchestra.

'Not only was the sound of a four-piece amplified combo very different from a big band, but club owners were thrilled to be able to pay four people rather than a 30 piece orchestra to entertain their clients.'

Gruhn has a point. A late '50s Fender Twin had 80W: Gibson amps were rarely that powerful, ever. More science between that golden guitar-plus-amp combination? Fender's single-coil pickups had a lower output than Gibson's humbuckers. Plug a humbucker'd Gibson into a Fender amp, and overdrive of the amp became easier. Leo Fender hadn't even wanted that, but that was the way rock'n'roll was going. A Fender amp and a Gibson guitar made for a raucous marriage. A Gibson guitar into a Gibson amp? Well, some say you just got more good tone.

Gibson amplifiers always did boast great looks. Yet, as Harry Hank notes, 'I think Gibson noted how well Fender was doing and tried to get creative by changing the aesthetic design... instead of concentrating on improving tonal quality.'

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'By the mid-'60s most all Gibson amps were pretty horrible, but Fender was shining with the classic blackface amps' – Harry Hank

So when it came to rock'n'roll taking over, even by happy accidents, Fender had stolen a march in the amp market. But soon, Gibson decided to throw multiple punches back.

What's In A Name?

Fender have always been very smart when it comes to branding. Think Telecaster, Stratocaster, Jaguar (for guitars) and the Pro, Twin Reverb, and Champ (amps). Such names don't explain anything, but such star-spangled wordage has allure. In the late '50s and early '60s, Gibson got their branding act together for their amp line.

The Gibson Les Paul amps had ceased production in 1961, when Les Paul's contract with Gibson first expired – hence the reworking of the Les Paul guitars as SGs. But new Gibson amps were coming, with the emphasis on bold names as well as the prosaic serial names. You could get the Raider, Invader, Gibsonette, Skylark (a rebranded GA-5/GA-6), Discoverer, Lancer, Rhythm King, and more.

The '50s and '60s also saw the emergence of models called Vanguard, Hawk, Scout, Titan, Mercury, Atlas, Apollo (a mighty 90W 2x12"), Ranger, Saturn, Explorer and Minuteman. From 1959 to 1961, Gibson even built the stereo GA-80T Vari-Tone amp, designed solely for use with the Vari-Tone-switch-equipped ES-355. Wow. Was that possibly too many amps for a company known better for its excellence in guitar making?

Despite these myriad models, Gibson never became a huge seller of their amps. According to the documentation on Gibson amp sales – and they were never as careful about chronicling amp production as much as their guitars – the biggest seller in a single year was still the GA-5 in 1959, with 5303 units shipped. But Gibson amps had their fans. Elvis Presley's guitarist Scotty Moore got a Gibson GA-77RVT Vanguard (launched in 1962) in 1965 and used it for decades (RVT equals reverb plus tremolo.) When Bob Dylan and his band 'went electric' at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, Tele-totin' Michael Bloomfield plugged into a Gibson Crestline combo – a rare but famous example of a Fender played through a Gibson amp.

Tube Exit

The late 1960s changed everything... for a while. Solid-state was the new way forward, apparently, and Fender, Vox USA and Gibson all travelled down the transistor road. As a consequence, all-valve amps such as the UK's Marshall, Hiwatt and Orange ascended to the throne of beefy tone. Fender survived, but Gibson amplifiers slowly slipped off the sonic map. Harry Hank reckons: 'By the mid-'60s most all Gibson amps were pretty horrible, and Fender was shining with the classic blackfaced amps of that era.'

It didn't help that the Gibson company would change ownership and direction. The GSS100 (Gibson Solid State) amp was a 'flagship', ➧➧

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A 1999 Gibson GA15RV, essentially a rebadged Trace Elliot Velocette 12R

GIBSON AMPLIFIERS

GIBSONETTE AMPLIFIER

GA-30 AMPLIFIER

GA-75 AMPLIFIER

but despite significant marketing these were seen as a poor replacement for the older valve models. In the late 1970s – when Norlin Corp owned Gibson – they entered a partnership with Moog. A new breed of Gibson solid-state amps, the Lab series, was co-designed by Robert Moog's team, but despite endorsements from BB King and major advertising, the Gibson Lab amps flopped. Of course, the Labs were ugly... but then again, few '70s amps were beauties.

When Gibson returned to 'proper' valve amps in the '90s and 2000s, the models were again something of a mishmash, even if they again looked great. In the late '90s Gibson bought the designs for the UK's Trace Elliot amps and rebranded them as Gibson Goldtones – Trace Elliot's 1990s Velocette model was the starting point. And, yes, let's leave aside the fact that the Velocette's styling borrowed heavily from original '50s Gibson amps.

Early examples of Gibson Goldtone amps (brown leatherette finish) were actually made in the UK, though the later ones (black Tolex) were US-built. Super Goldtone models followed from the USA alone, a wholly original Gibson design, and they garnered much acclaim.

Gibson even got a stellar endorser onboard in Aerosmith's Joe Perry. However, given that Perry owns 400-plus guitars (by then including his own signature Gibson Les Paul electrics), you can guarantee that Gibson Goldtones were not JP's only go-to combos. It was maybe too little, too late to regain a foothold in the amp market – even for a company as renowned as Gibson.

The Perception Problem

Gibson have always built – or at least 'branded' – fine amps. Some are so-so, some are superb. Yet Gibson amps were never widely popular; for a mirror image, look at Fender's acoustic guitars. Here's a thought: Gibson's guitar division is a 'stringed instrument' company, if you like. Fender is known as an 'electronic instrument' company. (Both corporations now own multiple brands across all music equipment, of course.)

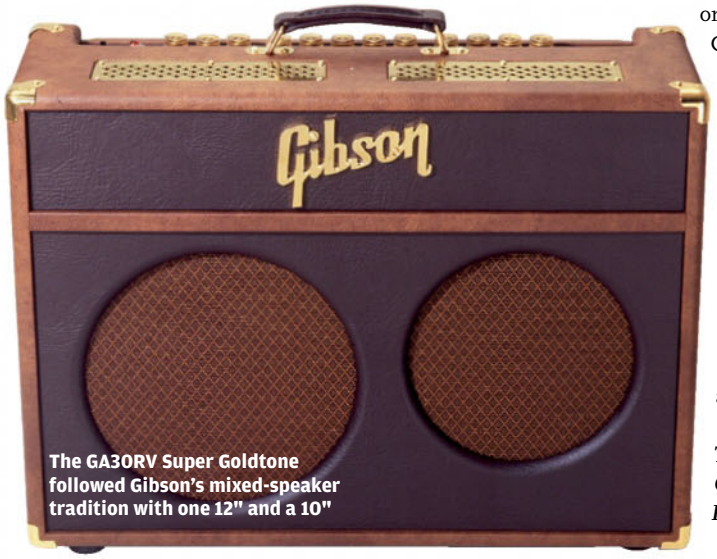
Maybe that original perception of the two companies endured. The greatest Gibson guitars are hard to beat for tonewoods and craftsmanship; Fender's guitars remain more 'utilitarian' and are of an easier-to-build design. And don't forget Leo Fender was a radio electronics engineer – he always had a head start when it came to amplification.

The two US guitar titans were unlikely to slug it out and win on all counts, even now. Both brands' electrics are formidable. Want a great acoustic? Of the two heavyweight makers, you'll covet a Gibson. Want an amp? You'll go to Fender.

So there's no final knockout between the two biggest brands, but Gibson lost to Fender on amps. 'Although they did produce amplifiers long before Fender, Gibson's [original] amps were designed for a clean, perhaps dark sound for use with their "jazz" guitars,' Harry Hank concludes. 'Fender amps were brighter-sounding and suitable for use with most any electric instruments.

'Also, Gibson never marketed their amps as well, since guitars were the main focus. Credit goes to Fender's marketing efforts – most notably Don Randall – and also the endorsement of many of the recording stars of the time who used Fender products. Fender amps were affordable, sounded good and were mass-produced, which put a lot of them on the market. I don't think Gibson realised the potential for amp sales the way Fender did.'

In 2014, Gibson Brands still produce superb electric and acoustic guitars, great basses and top-end mandolins. They also own DJ, speaker, piano, drum brands and more. And 2014's Gibson amps? Here endeth the tale, for eighty years after helping to pioneer them, Gibson does not make guitar amplifiers anymore.



The GA30RV Super Goldtone followed Gibson's mixed-speaker tradition with one 12" and a 10"

Thanks for their expertise: George Gruhn (guitars.com) and Harry Hank (hanksvintageguitars.com)

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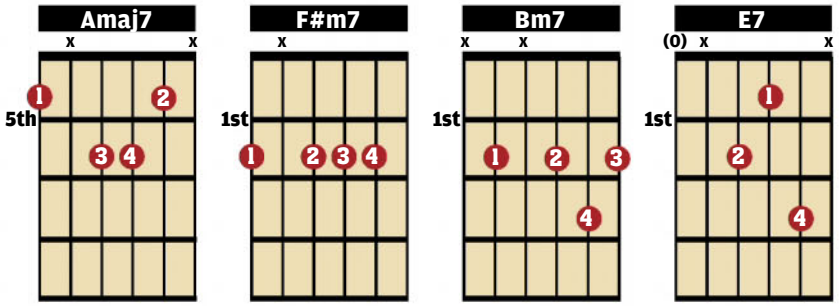
Swing Thing

Hone your rhythm skills on this classic round-the-houses chord progression...

The last two *Drills For Thrills* instalments have provided workouts for the fretting hand using jazz chords. This month's episode involves more of a workout for the picking hand, again using jazz chords and based on a useful standard jazz progression: Imaj7, VImin7, IImin7, V7 – in this case, Amaj7, F#m7, Bm7 and E7 in the key of A major. Exercise 1 introduces the chords, Exercise 2 shows them in a straightforward 'unfurnished' progression, and Exercise 3 – the real challenge in this month's Boot Camp – puts these chords into a jazz-style vamp complete with a walking bassline.

1 AMAJ7, F#M7, BM7 AND E7 CHORDS

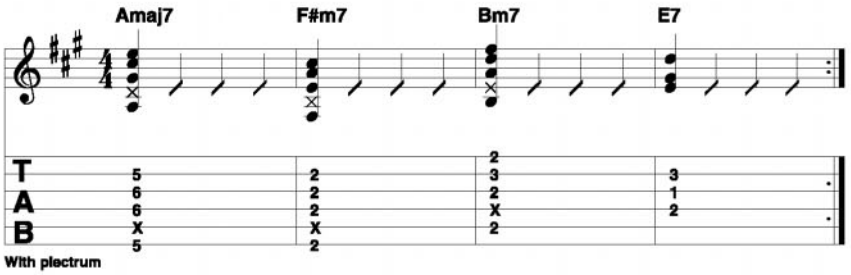
It's chord time. The formula for Amaj7 is root, third, fifth and natural seventh (A, C#, E and G# notes respectively), while the formula for F#m7 is root, flattened third, fifth and flattened seventh (F#, A, C# and E respectively). Since our third chord, Bm7, is also a minor seventh chord, the formula for this is the same as it is for F#m7, although the notes are different (B, D, F# and A). Finally, the formula for E7 is root, third, fifth and flattened seventh (E, G#, B and D) although in this particular voicing the fifth is omitted. The open bottom string in the E7 chord is not used in Exercise 2, but it comes into play in Exercise 3.



2 FOUR TO THE FLOOR

4/4 TIME

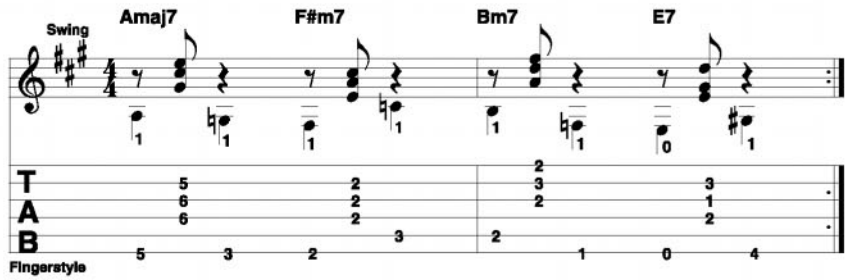
The next step is to strum each of the chords from Exercise 1 four times, and then change to the next one in the sequence. Play as written, then try playing each chord staccato by lifting the fretting hand fingers so they stop the notes sounding, but without lifting them so far as they leave the strings.



3 SWING BEAT

4/4 TIME

Although this could be played with a plectrum, you'll get a smoother sound playing fingerstyle with the thumb plucking the bass notes while the index, middle and ring fingers pluck the upper notes. Try playing the bassline – shown by the down stems in the music – on its own first of all (the numbers beside the bass notes in the music notation are suggested fingering). The exercise is indicated to be played 'swing'; the swing rhythm is basically when the beat is divided into two, but instead of these two parts being equal the first half of the beat is held for longer whilst the second half of the beat is shortened. This is typically the same as a triplet, with the first two notes tied together. However, a more extreme swing feel would be more like a dotted quaver/semiquaver rhythm. As long as the first half of the beat is longer than the second half of the beat, different degrees of the swing feel can be created – from a barely perceptible swing where the first half of the beat is only fractionally longer than the second half of the beat, to an extreme swing feel... like a double dotted quaver followed by a demisemiquaver (ie 32nd note). Experiment with different degrees of swing when playing the vamp. Start at a modest speed, such as crochet = 100. To increase the challenge and thus hone one's technique even further, aim to work up to a sharp swing feel (at least dotted quaver/semiquaver) at a tempo of crotchet = 208. At this speed the chords are barely perceptible but require very quick and accurate fretting and plucking.



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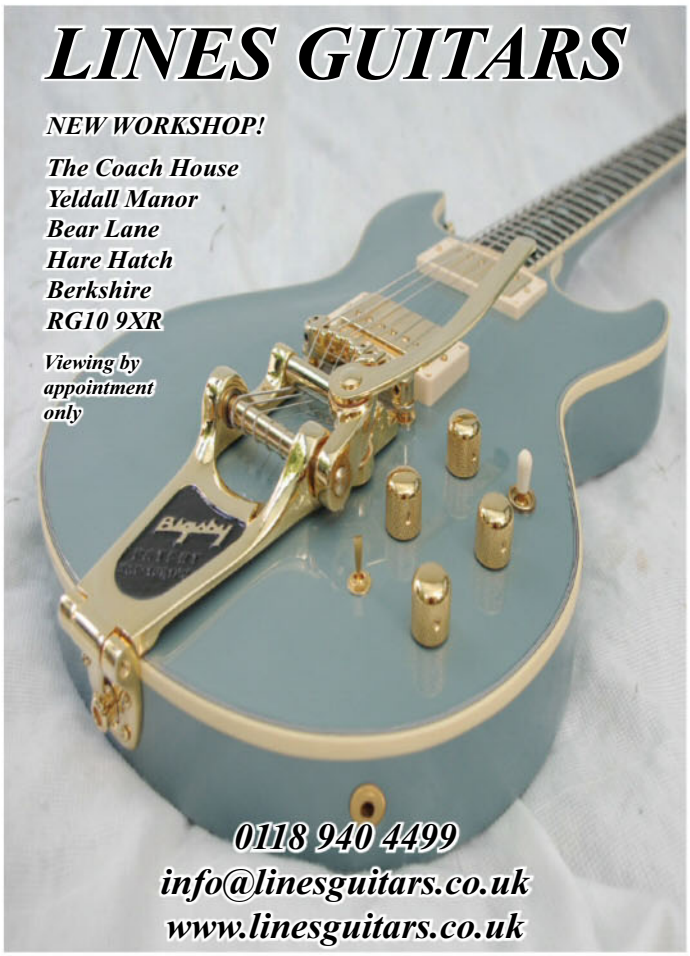

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Goldtone Banjo WL250 White Ladye, hard case, home use only, £595 ono. Will swap or p/x Fender Strat American Standard, American Special or similar. Cash either way. Tel: 01179 090922, Bristol

Gibson Les Paul Studio, alpine white, humbuckers, coil tap, slim taper neck, weight relief body, showroom condition, Gibson hardshell fitted case, never gigged, £600. Tel: 07745 908037, Aberdeen

Selmer Treble'n'Bass SV50 head 1970s, recently serviced, sounds beautiful, loud and clean, £300 ovno. Tel: 07930 289484 or bulph@yahoo.co.uk

PRS Custom 22, tobacco sunburst, hardtail, bird inlays on neck, two years old, hard case, good condition, Dragon 2 humbuckers, fantastic tones, £1150 ovno. Tel: Lee 075254 22529, Essex

Epiphone left-handed Sheraton with hard case, Korean, vgc, £250. Also Roland Gaia SH-01 synth, plus stand, as new, £200. Tel: 07766 517867, Surrey

Gibson EB-0, 1965, all original, cherry red, aged with patina/crazing, no neck breaks, £2000 ovno. Will swap for Trussart, Gus G1 or quality acoustic. Tel: 07895 355482, Lytham

Fender Hot Rod Deluxe III, unused, £495. Fender 2004 Anniversary Strat, sunburst, maple, gold hardware, unused, pristine, custom case, £1125. Rothwell Hellbender, hardly used, boxed, £50. Tel: Tony 01442 876740, Herts.

Fenton Weill vibrato unit, never used, 50s?, with copy of fitting instructions. A truly historic item in the guitar field, £75. Tel: Ray, 01787 464197

WANTED

Squier Super-Sonic Japan, late '90s, blue sparkle preferred. Call Ron 01384 873390 Stourbridge.

Gibson Les Paul R9 Plaintop 1997-2003 Historic Custom Shop, good original to modified 'player' considered. Fair price paid. Tel: 07814 797163 or email glen1149@hotmail.com, Devon

Mesa/Boogie Express 5:25, good condition, pref London area. Tel: Mick 020 8530 1208

Tailpiece for Gibson ES-140 3/4 scale with 'ridged' crossbar. Also Gibson pickguard: five-ply (B/W/B/W/B) '50s 'Royalite' type to cut for my ES-5. Tel: Geoff 01162 891919, Leicestershire

Digitech RP-6 or RP-7. Must be good condition and price, may collect. Tel: 07923 801153

Kay K592 Red Devil 1960s, must have Bigsby and white guard, in good to reasonable condition. Tel: Alan 0115 9255566

Pre-Washburn USA Parker in exchange for Giffin Micro (now worth £3k+), P94s, case, gorgeous. Will consider others. Pics. Tel: Richard 01233 712169 or email richardtheprofessor@yahoo.co.uk, Kent

Yamaha SG200 wanted, pearl white finish. Tel/txt: 07710 161598 or email Chris-r1968@hotmail.co.uk

Award-Session Stockton amp wanted. Tel: 07887 972019, Lanarkshire

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Soundtrack of my life

Martin Barre

The Jethro Tull guitarist's formative vinyl includes a fine mish-mash of UK and US rock and folk-rock plus a helping of classical and flamenco fusion

After frontman Ian Anderson, Martin Barre is the longest-serving member of prog/folk rock deviants Jethro Tull and his intricate lead guitar has always been an essential pillar of the band's sound. Barre started out as a sax player in the Moonrakers in the early '60s but gravitated to guitar as the decade progressed, passing through number of cult outfits, finally being snapped up by Tull when original guitarist Mick Abrahams left after the band's 1968 debut album. Commercial success followed Barre's recruitment almost instantly with albums such as *Stand Up, Aqualung* and *Thick As A Brick* contributing to over 60 million sales worldwide. With Tull placed in limbo by Anderson for the last decade, Barre has been busy with a solo career, and his fifth album *Order Of Play* sees him revisiting his blues rock roots, brilliantly re-imagining Tull classics and blues standards alike with the help of vocalist Dan Crisp.

Cream

DISRAELI GEARS

I was late catching on to Eric Clapton, as I couldn't ever find a John Mayall gig to go to. I bought and loved the record *Fresh Cream* and couldn't wait

for the next album; it was an agonising delay. When it came I wasn't disappointed; Clapton was at his best – melodic, precise... and the guitar tone was beautiful!

The Beatles

SERGEANT PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND

Living in London in the mid-'60s was brilliant. We had Portobello Road and the King's Road and we listened to music almost every night. I discovered

Zappa, Beefheart and all the blues artists, but my best memory is sitting with friends being amazed at *Sergeant Pepper*. It changed the direction of music in the UK.

Neil Young

AFTER THE GOLDRUSH

Neil Young has always been a fashionably cool artist throughout his career. There isn't a track on this album that I don't love to bits. His great voice

and the easy chord changes carry you along effortlessly. He seems to owe his style to nobody and his guitar playing is really unique, with a huge amount of soul.

Jimi Hendrix

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED

I first met Jimi the night he arrived in the UK. He was sitting on top of a Vox amp playing his Strat. We shared many stages – what a privilege – and it

was so great that as well as being an amazing musician, singer and songwriter, he was a really nice person as well. His music is the definition of 'timeless'.

Halle Orchestra

ELGAR SYMPHONY NO 1

Since I first heard Elgar's music in the '70s, I have grown to love all his work and still find new pieces that amaze me. He was so prolific and he wrote

lengthy and complex compositions for his own ensemble every week. To me, this is the most beautiful piece of music ever written. It's a master degree course in orchestral writing.

Chicago

17

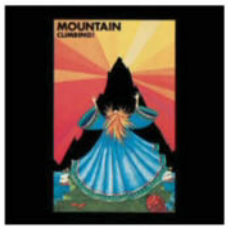
If rock music had two branches, one from the USA and one from the UK, Chicago would be pretty near to the top of theirs. They epitomised the

American formula of great vocals, exciting arranging and playing. I only saw them play live once, but it was a stunning performance. No other band could get near to this quality.

Mountain

CLIMBING!

I avoided the styles of other players as I wanted my own take on playing guitar – until I met Leslie West! They supported us on a couple of US tours



and taught us about the true function of a group of players. Leslie had a wonderful sense of melody and their connection on stage was mesmerising. They were a joy to watch.

The Guitar Trio

PACO DE LUCIA, AL DI MEOLA, JOHN MCLAUGHLIN

The lines that the three guitarists play are just incredible and the compositions and arrangements were really sublime. It got me interested in other

forms of flamenco music; too complicated for me to learn anything from, but a joy to hear. For sheer breathtaking virtuosity, this has to be the album. A good therapy for narcissists!

Crosby, Stills & Nash

CROSBY, STILLS & NASH

I loved touring America, especially in the early days, as it was a voyage of discovery, drinking in the fabulous culture. When we first visited Los

Angeles the billboard opposite my hotel room was for CSN's first album. Of course, I bought it straight away and listening to it still brings back those wonderful days.

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